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FALL of the BEASTS



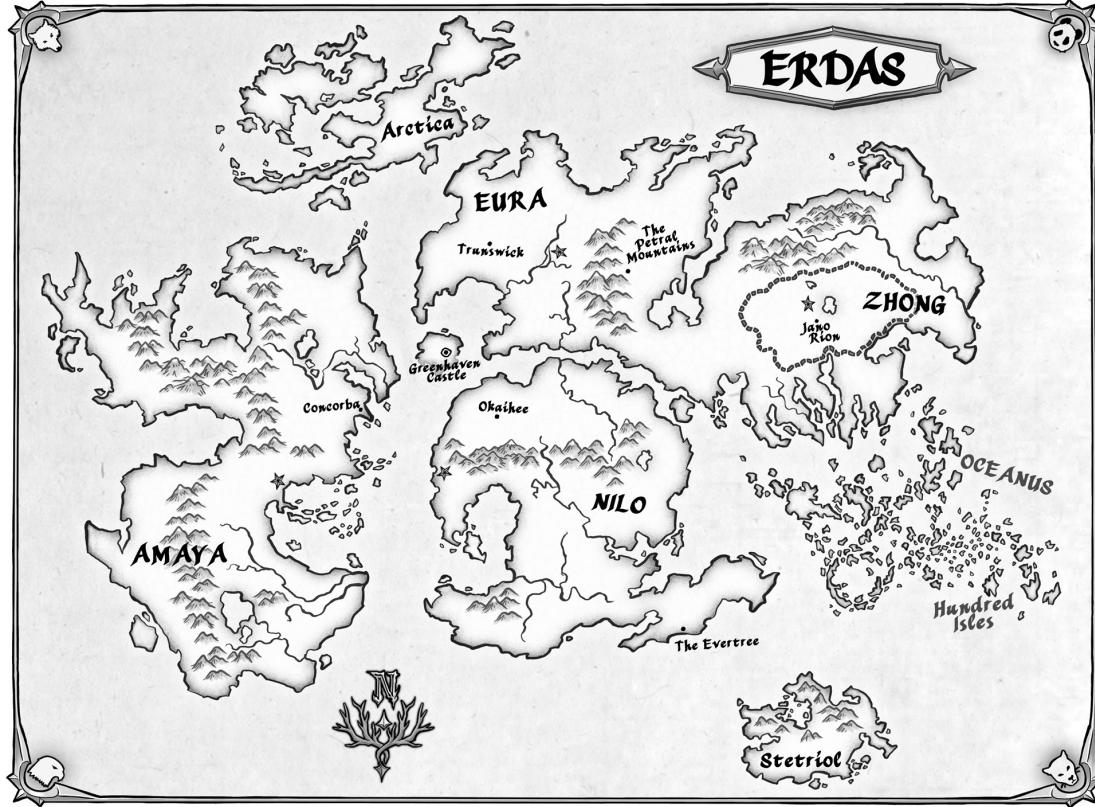
THE DRAGON'S EYE

Sarwat Chadda



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To my girls—SC

CONTENTS

[Eye Symbol](#)

[Greencloak Letter](#)

[Quote Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Map of Erdas](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1. AT SEA](#)

[2. THE SUMMER PALACE](#)

[3. EMPRESS SONG](#)

[4. CHIEF UGO](#)

[5. ONE HOUR](#)

[6. FIRE](#)

[7. SWARM](#)

[8. FALLS](#)

[9. THE DRAGON'S EYE](#)

[10. SEASPRAY](#)

[11. OLD FRIENDS](#)

[12. ESCAPE](#)

[13. TO THE BOAT](#)

[14. SONG'S QUARTERS](#)

[15. SONG'S DESCENT](#)

[16. THE WOLF](#)

[17. THE FALCON](#)

[18. THE PANDA](#)

[19. THE LEOPARD](#)

[20. SID](#)

[21. KANA AND CORDELIA](#)

[22. SONG AND MEILIN](#)

[23. PEACE](#)

[Letter to the Fans](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Online Game Code](#)
[Horizon Sneak Peek](#)
[Spirit Animals Game](#)
[Copyright](#)



1

AT SEA

ROLLAN SHIFTED IN HIS HAMMOCK, VAINLY SEARCHING for sleep. The coarse sackcloth reeked, but it was better than being on the floor, where a film of seawater layered the wood and a company of rats nibbled at bare toes or exposed ears.

The ship's cramped brig had only one porthole—closed and on the far side of the corridor—so there was little ventilation. The air tasted stale and stifling, laden with the stink of too many days at sea.

The old wooden hull of the Oathbound schooner groaned against the weight of the waves. Then there were more sounds: a hiss, a crack, a scream.

“She’s at it again,” declared Conor.

Reluctantly, Rollan opened his eyes. He squinted until they adjusted to the permanent gloom of the cell, and then he saw his friends.

Conor slouched up against the bars, his arms hanging through the rusty iron, head tilted to the noise above.

He winced at the next scream.

Rollan rolled out of the hammock and past Abeke, who'd been woken by the cries echoing from above. She gritted

her teeth. "It's Cordelia ..." she said. "Cordelia *the Kind*."

Meilin joined Conor by the bars and flinched at the third cry, louder and sharper than before. "That poor man."

"There'll be no one to sail this ship if she carries on like this," said Rollan.

"What do you think he did?" asked Abeke.

Rollan shrugged. "He doesn't need to have *done* anything."

He thought back to their capture at the Niloan library, Maktaba. They'd been searching for the legendary bond token, Stormspeaker. They'd teamed up with Takoda and Xanthe, only to be betrayed—and captured—once they'd succeeded in gaining the token.

Takoda and Xanthe were chained and bundled on a ship to Greenhaven, while Rollan and his friends were headed to Zhong.

Conor glanced over at the scratches he'd been making on the wall. There were fifteen.

There was another hiss and cry, but now reduced to a pitiful whimper.

Fifteen days trapped down here. Fifteen days of hearing the cruel hiss of the whip and the cries of whatever poor unfortunate Cordelia had picked to torment, if no other reason than that she could.

Why not them? She hated Rollan and his companions, yet Cordelia never chose to vent her cruelty on any of them. But sooner or later she'd grow bored of whipping sailors....

Then she'd come down here and start on the prisoners.

Maybe she wouldn't begin with them.

The weary weeks at sea hadn't been spent totally alone. The Oathbound were bounty hunters, and clearly business was good.

Hunting Greencloaks seemed to pay well. The cell next to theirs held three more. They'd been brought on board a few days ago, and the news was grim.

Rollan knocked on the wall between them. "You awake, Kofe?"

There was a grunt and a return knock. Then a cough. "Of course. How can anyone sleep with what's going on up there?"

"Where were we?" asked Rollan.

Kofe laughed. It was a generous belly rumble and Rollan felt it through the wood. "Best meal you've ever had. Mine was a squirrel. Cooked on a spit, out in the woods west of Greenhaven."

"Doesn't sound so special."

"I was real hungry, boy. Sitting out under the moon, quiet as you like. Nothing in the world but me and Sniffler."

Sniffler made his presence known with a squeak. Unlike everyone else here, the rat was quite at home in the hull.

Alongside Kofe was Lady Cranston, a distant relative to the Trunswicks, and Salaman, from northern Nilo. The three Greencloaks knew of Rollan and his friends, of course, and it was reassuring to have them on board, even if they were prisoners.

"You think they've caught everyone?" asked Rollan.

"Looking to get rescued?" Kofe replied. He sighed. "Who knows? The Oathbound have been planning this for a long time. The only reason we weren't caught sooner was because we were on a mission, far from Greenhaven. We won't be the only ones. There'll be Greencloaks hiding out, but with Olvan and Lenori captured, it's not looking good. We're on our own, boy."

On our own. Rollan was used to that.

Wasn't it supposed to be different? He was a Greencloak. The ancient order had allies everywhere, yet it had been taken down in a matter of months.

But some things rot from within.

Impostors had gotten themselves recruited into the Greencloaks. They'd learned its secrets, dug out its

weaknesses. They'd publicly murdered the Emperor of Zhong while wearing the uniform, right as the Greencloaks were at their most vulnerable. When the blow came, the Greencloaks were swiftly blamed and imprisoned.

Imprisoned, like now.

There was one escape, however.

Rollan closed his eyes. It was getting easier and easier, connecting to Essix. She hadn't been captured with the other Greencloaks in Nilo, and was tailing the boat to see where they went.

Soon he was there with her, following their ship. His heart jumped as he soared among the clouds. The wind roared in his ears, buffeting Essix's sleek body. Or was it his? Now they were one and the same.

Essix cried out as she spun downward, piercing through a flock of panicked seagulls Rollan laughed to see them break formation as they squawked in outrage. Essix merely flicked her wing tips and darted off.

This was pure freedom. His mind knew it was a fiction—he was trapped in the smelly belly of a ship—but his heart was filled with such joy that his chest swelled to bursting.

And pride. What animal could compare to Essix? Greatest of the Great Beasts!

He'd struggled, back when she'd first come into his life. He'd watched with jealousy at the way Meilin commanded Jhi, and the close, instinctive bond between Conor and Briggan.

As a street orphan he'd never owned anything valuable. Then he'd been given a Great Beast, one of the Four Fallen. Was it any wonder he'd struggled to understand such a gift?

He'd known people back in Concorba who'd been like him and struck it lucky. Most had squandered their good fortune and ended up back where they'd started sooner than they imagined.

Sure, he'd come close. Planning to run away from Greenhaven the first chance he'd gotten. Refusing to join until Tarik's death.

Sticking to his friends had taken a lot of courage, more than he'd imagined.

He could picture Greenhaven now. The towers and the surrounding sea of grass. The woods and the stables, and the banners fluttering from the battlements.

He'd seen it through Essix's eyes, too. Many times, as they honed their bond together. Rollan had glided through the treetops as she accelerated toward the castle. The trees crowded around her, him, them, but she was too swift, too cunning to be trapped among the branches and boughs.

"Fly, boy, fly! Fly away if you can!"

Rollan snapped his eyes open.

"Wheeee!"

He ran to the cell door. "Will you shut up?"

"Ignore him," suggested Abeke.

"Wheeee! Flap, flap, flap in the sky!"

The Greencloaks weren't the only prisoners down here. There was one other.

The mad old man.

As he was Zhongese, Meilin had tried talking to him at the beginning. The man ignored her, staring and mumbling and occasionally laughing wildly. The sailors found him amusing, but Rollan just wondered why he was here.

Even now he was peering through the bars, whispering to himself. He caught Rollan's gaze and then beat his arms in the air, laughing as he flapped around his small cell.

"I'll be like that if I don't get out of here soon," complained Conor.

The hatch at the far end of the narrow corridor opened.

A column of light lit the ladder and a small diameter at the foot of it. Rollan's eyes watered; it was the first true sunlight he'd seen in days. Voices spoke and a couple of

shadows passed at the hatch opening. One of them was a woman's.

Rollan clenched his fists. Maybe today was the day Cordelia came for him. He wouldn't go without a fight. A quick glance at his companions and he saw the same defiance.

But it wasn't Cordelia the Kind who descended into the semidarkness of the ship's hold.

It was Kana.

Once, they'd called her Anka. Rollan and the others had thought she was a Greencloak. A friend. But that had all been a lie, right from the very beginning. In reality, she was the *captain* of the Oathbound, the mercenaries who had relentlessly pursued them. And like all high-ranking Oathbound, she carried a title that belied her true nature: Kana the Honest.

Unlike the others, however, Kana wore only a simple black uniform, dispensing with the usual brass collar and wrist guards.

All the better to hide in, Rollan thought despondently.

The traitor wrinkled her nose at the dank odors that hung in the uttermost depths of the hull. Almost daintily, she kicked aside a rat that had dared to come sniffing at her boot. Using the tip of her staff, she pushed open the porthole, and Rollan felt the sudden gust of fresh air.

Someone from above passed a lantern down to Kana, and she raised it ahead of her. When its glow fell on them, all gathered at the cell bars. She smiled with cold satisfaction. "You've made yourselves at home, I see."

"There's room enough for you," said Conor. "Why don't you come in?"

Kana stepped closer, using her lantern to inspect their cell, but well out of reach of any sudden lunges. "Your journey is almost over. We're near the coast of Zhong and

will be coming into dock by sunset." Kana smiled. "You have a friend who's eager to see you."

Rollan frowned. "A friend like Cordelia?"

"Cordelia can be unruly, I admit that," the woman said with a sigh. "You should appreciate how hard it's been to stop her from coming down here and expressing her ... enthusiasm upon any of you."

"You didn't stop her from torturing the sailors," Rollan said.

Kana's response was a shrug. Apparently the pain of a few nameless sailors meant nothing to her.

How had they gotten themselves into this mess?

Rollan met Kana's gaze. "What about Worthy? Cordelia got out. So what did you do with *him*?"

Kana's eyebrows raised a hair, though her face remained otherwise still. "You won't be seeing him again."

Rollan didn't want to believe that. He glanced over at Conor. The two boys had grown up together. Conor was once Worthy's servant, back when the Redcloak went by Devin Trunswick. Worthy had come a long way from the obnoxious noble to become their ally and friend. Together they'd found an ancient artifact in Eura, a sword named the Wildcat's Claw. Worthy had tried his best to prevent it from falling into the hands of Cordelia and the Oathbound by bringing down the tomb where the sword had been hidden.

But the Oathbound had managed to retrieve the blade out of the collapsed wreckage.

It was now in Cordelia's hands. Rollan couldn't think of anything worse.

Who was he kidding? Of course he could. Easily.

Most of the ancient Greencloak gifts were now in the possession of Kana's mercenaries. They had the Claw, the Heart of the Land amulet, and the legendary Stormspeaker crown.

Only the Dragon's Eye remained ...

And there was no one left to stop them. With Rollan and his friends locked up here and the Greencloaks imprisoned in Greenhaven, the Oathbound were unstoppable.

Rollan and the others glanced up as they heard a heavy thump from the deck. The screaming abruptly stopped.

“Sounds like Cordelia’s had her fun.” Kana turned back toward the ladder. “The adventure is almost over, children.”

The hatch slammed shut once she left, and Rollan heard the rattle of a bolt being shoved in place.

Conor shook the bars. “We’ve got to do something!”

Abeke put her hand on Conor’s shoulder. “Save your strength. We may get our chance yet.”

“But what if we don’t?”

The breeze from the opened porthole was feeble, but Rollan appreciated it nevertheless. Seagulls squawked somewhere outside. Rollan knew that meant they were nearing land.

Who was waiting for them in Zhong? The Oathbound were mercenaries, but they’d long been in the employ of the various governments of Erdas. Rollan had a sinking feeling.

The only person he could think of was Princess Song, daughter to the emperor. The last time they’d seen her was following her father’s death, shocked and heartbroken. Though once a supporter of the Greencloaks, it was ultimately Song who’d ordered their arrest.

Rollan peered closer at the small circle of light ahead. “She left the porthole open.”

Meilin looked up. “It’s too small, even if we could reach it.”

Rollan smiled. “Too small for us. But not Essix. She’s been following us since Nilo.”

“But what can Essix do for us now?” asked Conor.

“Warn Greenhaven. The Greencloaks may be prisoners, but they’re the only allies we’ve got. Maybe she can lead

someone back to us."

Rollan whistled, just hoping the hatch was thick enough to muffle the sound. After a long, tense moment, no Oathbound goons had come to check on them ... but a shadow darkened the porthole.

A large gyrfalcon peered inside. The falcon shook out her wings and began preening herself.

"We don't have time for this, Essix." Rollan held his hand through the bars, toward the open porthole. Clutched between his fingers was a note, scratched on a scrap of leather he'd torn from his boot. "D'you think you can reach that?"

Essix let out a small cry, then shot into the cabin. She'd snatched up the scrap of leather in a blink, landing on the floorboards just outside the cage.

Abeke grinned. "I think that's a yes."

Rollan smiled, kneeling and taking the scrap back. "Probably easier if you don't have to carry it in your mouth while you fly."

He rolled the cutting around Essix's leg, then tied it tightly with a second thin strip of leather. Rollan looked into the falcon's bright eyes. "This will tell whoever you can find that we're back in Zhong, and that the Oathbound have three of the relics."

Essix bobbed her head a few times then sprang into the air. It took a single beat, and she darted through the narrow opening.

The image rushed unbidden and uncontrolled through Rollan's mind.

He felt himself soaring over the waves. Looking through Essix's own eyes, he was startled to see her looking at him, a small face craning at the light shining through the open porthole.

He marveled at the sharpness of her vision, the clarity with which she saw the world. The colors were brighter, everything more defined, sharper. The dimming sunlight

catching the sea spray as waves were thrown up against the glistening hull. The water droplets shone like rubies, momentarily frozen between rising and falling, then merged again with the sea.

Rollan stumbled and Conor caught him, setting him back onto his feet. The boy looked at him quizzically. "You all right?"

Rollan glimpsed her swooping over the waves. Then Essix tilted vertically upward and was gone.

He turned back and was met by three expectant faces. "It'll take a day or two to reach Greenhaven and, even if help is coming, it'll be a while before it arrives."

Meilin sighed. "So we're on our own?"

Rollan shrugged, trying to project some confidence. "What's new?"

Sudden shouts drew their attention back to the ship, rather than the fleeing bird.

Rollan's heart quickened with dread. "You think Cordelia's starting on another one?"

Bare feet scurried upon the wooden boards above. The shouts weren't cries of pain, but commands. The ship creaked as the rudder turned against the direction of the waves.

"No," replied Meilin. "We're coming into port."

The sailors knew their business. They were clearly hurrying around the main deck, despite the presence of the terrifying Cordelia, or perhaps because of it.

It was only minutes later that the chains of the anchors rattled free. Rollan could hear them splashing loudly into the water. Ropes hissed through the air and the ship buffeted again and again as the pilot worked to bring it against the quayside.

The hatch opened up. This time it was Cordelia.

Her boots were sprinkled with blood.

Three sailors came in with her, one in manacles and the rest with swords drawn. Cordelia herself held the Wildcat's

Claw, her gloved hand constantly clenching and unclenching around its hilt.

Rollan met her gaze. "I hope you're taking good care of that sword. We'll be wanting it back soon."

Cordelia drew it out by a few inches, just enough for the torchlight to catch its bright silvery edge. "Feel free to try and take it off me."

She wants an excuse to use it.

He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. For now. But sooner or later, a chance might come up....

One by one, the sailors manacled the Greencloaks. Cordelia glanced impatiently over her shoulder the whole time.

Climbing out of the hull wasn't easy with his hands bound, but Rollan managed. He blinked as the sunlight assailed him.

It took a few moments for his eyes to get used to it. They'd been held in the gloom for weeks and the sky was dazzling, even at evening time.

The others were equally stunned. But eventually sight returned.

They were in a natural crescent bay with high cliffs on three sides and the sea at their backs. The docks were lined with Zhongese soldiers. Apart from their vessel, there were only two other ships, much smaller, and a cluster of rowboats bobbing in the waves. Steps, cut into the natural rock, zigzagged their way up.

An elegant palace dominated the top of the cliffs. It was long and sinewy in design, with a suspended platform at the very tip of the crescent.

"It's ... beautiful," breathed Rollan.

"Xin Kao Dai," said Meilin, with a note of sadness. "The emperor's Summer Palace."



THE SUMMER PALACE

CORDELIA SHOVED CONOR ALONG THE GANGPLANK. "Get a move on."

Conor spun to her, a snarl on his lips. "I go at my own pace."

Cordelia bristled. She wore more armor than the usual brass cuffs and collars of the Oathbound uniform. Her boots had brass shin guards, and plates were strapped to her thighs. A heavy mail covered her from shoulders to below her waist.

There was a nervous, unstable twitch in the way she gripped Wildcat's Claw, but Conor had spent too long cooped up in a cell. He'd grown up a shepherd, used to the free sky overhead and grass underfoot. He'd taken his imprisonment even worse than the rest of his friends.

If Cordelia wanted a fight, he was happy to give it to her, chains or no chains.

Kana stepped between them. She narrowed her eyes at Conor. "We have a problem here?"

Meilin touched her hand to Conor's arm. "Now's not the time," she whispered.

So the four of them marched off the ship and onto the docks.

The three adult Greencloaks were behind them, then came the crazy old man. He hobbled bowlegged down the gangplank, his scrawny limbs wrapped in chains. It was almost comical how weighed down he was, considering he appeared to be the feeblest of any of them. The man bit his beard and winced as he trod over the pebbles, then looked pitifully over at Conor. "My feet hurt."

"Should have worn some sandals, then."

The man looked up at the palace. "How about a piggyback?"

"All the way up? I might drop you."

Kofe shrugged. "I'll carry you, old man. Just don't wriggle."

Conor hadn't gotten a good look at his fellow Greencloaks, not until now. Kofe was just like he sounded, big. The man's beard was threaded with gray, but he was muscular, a born survivor judging by the scars. Conor knew the type, old shepherds who'd slept outdoors through sun and snow, their skin wrinkled like old leather and just as tough.

Lady Cranston was *not* how he'd expected. Her voice had been soft, cultured, and full of clever words. He'd had an image of a tall, delicate noblewoman wearing furs and silks. Instead he saw a middle-aged woman in a heavy tunic with well-worn boots and a face as hard as flint. Those blue eyes of hers shone with swift thoughts. She hooked her fingers in her belt, despite the chains, and Conor got the firm impression those chains wouldn't handicap her much if it came to a fight.

The third of their trio, Salaman, made him think of Tarik. Conor shot Rollan a glance. By the look in Rollan's eyes, Conor suspected he was thinking the same thing.

Salaman was dusky and lean. He looked years older than the rest, and the others weren't young. His beard was pure white, though short and neat. The old man didn't appear withered by his years, rather the opposite. It seemed age had merely shorn him of any weakness.

If Tarik had had an older brother, Conor reckoned he would have looked a lot like Salaman.

The three elder Greencloaks had an ease around each other. They didn't need to talk, but there were glances and nods and other silent communication between them.

What were they planning? Escape?

Judging by the way the Oathbound handled these three—cautious, even a little fearful—maybe they did have a chance.

The old man scrabbled up on Kofe's back. The Greencloak took the extra weight without effort.

Conor glanced down at his mark. Briggan lay across the back of his forearm. Conor was tempted to summon the big wolf here and now. After weeks in the hull he wanted to run and run, Briggan at his heels.

He grinned to himself. Run and maybe cause a bit of trouble ...

Rollan caught his look, but shook his head.

The grin dropped to a frown. Rollan was right. How far would they get in these chains? Yet Conor was tired of biding his time. His patience had been used up. Every muscle burned, desperate to break into action. To run. To fight. To show the Oathbound what he and his companions were truly capable of.

Kana stepped up to him. "Don't get any bright ideas, Conor."

Conor smiled and took a deep breath. "What ideas? I'm just enjoying the fresh air."

"I want you to keep that beast safe and sleeping right where he is. Got it?"

"Or what?"

She tilted her head to a group of sailors lining the decks. Each held a loaded crossbow.

"They've got a good range," said Kana, "and would make a mess of your spirit animal."

Conor scowled. "You sure they'd shoot *Briggan*? Maybe one might decide to send a quarrel at Cordelia? She hasn't exactly made many friends, has she?"

Kana scowled and moved on down the line, personally checking the manacles on each and every one of them.

Meilin leaned over. "You aren't exactly making friends, either."

"Tried that already, and look how it turned out." Conor grimaced. "It's just a bit of backchat, Meilin. She deserves it."

"She does, but we need her to relax her guard. You prodding her only keeps her attentive, wary. If we act more ... docile, then maybe they'll make a mistake. One we can exploit."

"Docile?" He laughed. "That's almost funny coming from you."

Meilin nodded. "It's something I've learned from Jhi. To cultivate a *quiet* strength."

"Might be a bit late for that. You've got a bit of a reputation, remember?"

"What's that mean?" If Meilin's arms had been free, Conor suspected she'd be crossing them right about now.

"Hey, I'm not the one who can break rocks with spinning high kicks," he said. "Which you are going to have to teach me one day."

"You know how to handle yourself, Conor. It's not graceful, the way you fight, but it is effective."

"And I fight even better with Briggan at my side." He looked around. "If Abeke released Uraza then maybe—"

"And that's exactly what Kana would expect. She's waiting for us to do something stupid."

"Then what options do we have?" he asked, kicking at pebbles as they moved.

"We wait until *they* do something stupid."

He wished he had Meilin's confidence, but the Oathbound had been one step ahead all the way. They weren't going to leave anything to chance now, not when they had three of the ancient relics.

Others had freed their spirit animals. A big wolverine with dark brown fur and a jet-black muzzle sniffed around them. Sid the Generous—another Oathbound lieutenant—scratched the beast between the ears and the wolverine responded with a friendly growl. Then it cast its gaze at Conor and the growl became a threatening snarl. There was dense muscle under the fur. Conor knew these creatures would take on, and defeat, opponents much bigger.

How had such an animal bonded with Sid?

He shook his head. Some things didn't make much sense.

"So this is where the emperor spends his summers? Very nice," said Conor. Who would have thought there was so much marble in all Erdas? "Still, it's no rickety shepherd's hut up in the mountains."

"Drafty and stinking of damp sheep?"

Conor took a deep breath, as though those sheep were around him now. "There's no sweeter smell."

Meilin smiled, despite it all. "You miss the old life?"

Conor shook his chains. "At moments like these, yeah, I do."

"Tell me about it." Meilin gazed across the docks and the pebble beach beyond. "Looks like we've got another visitor."

Something was swimming through the gentle waves toward the beach. Sunlight shone upon slick greenish-blue scales and a strong, thick tail that propelled the creature

swiftly through the water. Then, among the froth breaking upon the shingle, out crawled a large lizard.

Meilin's eyes narrowed. "A Zhongese water dragon. I didn't know they swam so close to the city."

The lizard flicked droplets of seawater off its tail, then plodded up to an exposed slab of rock, a piece of granite cliff that must have cracked free. The water dragon turned around in a circle, then settled itself down on a sunny spot to bask. It didn't close its eyes to sleep. Instead it kept them slitted and wary.

It was about four feet long and well fed. Curiously, the animal wore a collar. The leather strap was unfussy, but subtly decorated with branded patterns.

Conor's foot was kicked from under him. Hands manacled, he fell flat onto the pebbles.

"Oops," said Cordelia.

Blind fury filled Conor's heart. He rolled to his feet in one swift movement and charged in, taking Cordelia unawares. He rammed his head into her stomach and swung both hands up as she stumbled back. The heavy chains hanging from his wrist caught her across the jaw and she cried out, collapsing.

"Enough!" Kana gripped the chains and pulled him off.

Cordelia crawled to her feet. Her mouth was bloody and her gaze filled with dark rage. "You've made a stupid mistake, boy..."

She drew the Wildcat's Claw.

The steel shimmered with amber and golden light as flames caressed the blade. Cordelia gripped it with both hands and pointed it at Conor.

She's insane.

He could see madness in Cordelia's eyes, and maybe the Wildcat's Claw was feeding that madness. Cordelia gritted her teeth. "Come on."

Even Kana looked wary. She didn't put herself between them. Perhaps she was afraid Cordelia would cut her down, too.

Conor backed away. "Unlock these chains and I'll fight you."

Cordelia laughed. "You'll fight me one way or another."

"Conor, move!" Meilin screamed as Cordelia charged him. Conor leaped aside, rolling over the stones as he felt the heat of the blade pass inches from his back. He sprang up and threw a stone at Cordelia.

Conor had spent more than enough summers protecting sheep from hungry predators. Every young shepherd had to learn to throw hard and straight.

The rock smacked Cordelia hard in the forehead, and she screamed with fury and pain. She braced herself, thrusting the sword ahead of her blindly as she stumbled under the impact.

The flames grew fiercer, fueled by her rage.

Conor couldn't win this fight by throwing stones. Chained, unarmed, and facing a fiery sword, he needed to use his wits.

He backed farther down the beach. The sailors and guards watched, but didn't intervene.

Water lapped around his ankles.

Cordelia spat. She turned the Wildcat's Claw in long, slow circles, drawing fiery hoops through the air. She grinned. "Where are you going to run to, boy?"

Conor waded farther in. The water was around his thighs. "Come and get me, Cordelia."

"Cordelia, don't do it," said Sid. "Let him come to you."

"Shut your mouth, Sid. The boy's going to be taught a lesson, and that can't wait."

Both hands tight around the hilt, Cordelia waded in after Conor.

Cordelia ... and all her heavy armor.

The pebbles underfoot were slippery with seaweed. The sword hissed as droplets steamed upon the fiery metal.

But if Cordelia noticed these things, she didn't care. All she wanted was to inflict pain.

Conor concentrated on keeping his balance.

The stones beneath the water had been worn smooth and flat. They balanced unevenly on each other. The lapping waves, while not high, carried with them an irresistible force. Each one was moved by countless tons of water.

Conor felt with his boots as he entered waist-deep into the brine. The flat rock, already slick, was wobbly.

He stepped off it and receded another foot.

Cordelia laughed. "You want to drown? Is that your plan?"

Conor stepped back. He yelled as he stumbled, throwing up his arms to try and keep his balance.

Seeing her chance, Cordelia yelled and surged forward.

Conor suddenly straightened up. The stumble had been fake. He swung his chain through the air.

Cordelia dodged, right onto the wobbly rock. Her right foot slipped away from her and down she went. The Wildcat's Claw steamed and went out.

Conor rushed forward.

Cordelia floundered under the water. The mail shirt itself weighed almost twenty pounds and her arms, too, were encased in shiny brass. Each time she tried to rise, Conor knocked her back down.

The fury in her eyes transformed to fear. It was only a few feet of water, but there were plenty of folk stories of knights drowning in puddles because of the weight of their armor.

"Get her up!" yelled Kana. She and a group of sailors were wading forward.

One of them grabbed Conor and hauled him back to the beach as the others raised up Cordelia. She screamed

incoherently, fighting them even as they tried to save her. One let go and down she splashed again.

Rollan laughed, then embraced Conor. “Didn’t know you had it in you, Conor.”

Abeke and Meilin looked on proudly.

In the end, it took four sailors to drag Cordelia out of the sea. They dropped her onto the beach, and not gently, either. Kana waded out last of all, the Wildcat’s Claw now in her hands. She looked down as Cordelia coughed up seawater. Kana dropped the sword beside the half-drowned woman. “We’ve wasted enough time already.”

Cordelia snatched the sword and glared at Conor. Then, teeth gritted, she shoved it back into its scabbard.

Kana led the way up the path to the Summer Palace. The climb was steep and narrow. The cliffs that surrounded them were formed from black granite and patched with green tufts of moss. Water seeped out through cracks, and rivulets streamed over the jagged surface.

At the cliff top, the path transformed into a wide flagstone road leading straight to the palace gates. The entrance was guarded by Zhongese soldiers in bright armor and plumed helmets. Each man was a giant, and the halberds they carried looked as if they could slice an ox in half.

They glanced at the arriving party. Conor saw the captain of the Zhongese guards sneer as his gaze fell upon the Oathbound. Then he barked an order and the gates creaked slowly open.

The guards and sailors remained outside. Before passing through the gate, Kana turned and handed the wiry first mate a jangling bag of coins. “Our business is concluded.” She glanced at Conor as the sailors trekked back to their ship. “It would be in your best interests to behave.”

“Where are you taking us?” asked Abeke.

A brief smile flickered across Kana’s lips. “To see an old friend of mine, and my employer.”

Marble statues lined the courtyard path: magnificent beasts sculpted by masters. Proud lions, elegant herons. There were snakes and antelopes and eagles, all manner of beasts. But Conor's attention fell on a water dragon.

Meilin must have caught his look. "That belonged to an ancient hero of Zhong. His animal bond was so powerful that he could supposedly control the sea."

"No talking," commanded Kana.

The group passed through great halls with mosaics covering the floors, and along corridors lined with portraits of past emperors. Conor was surprised to find that there weren't any members of the official Zhongese guard inside the palace grounds. Just a few timid servants and *many* black-cloaked Oathbound.

The party stopped outside a pair of huge bronze doors. A servant struck the panel with a hammer, and the doors slowly parted.

The audience chamber was surrounded by windows so it could look out over the sea. In the center was a throne carved from gold and silver, studded with a medley of colorful gems. Intricately dressed servants waited on either side of the throne, and sitting upon it was ...

"Princess Song?" said Meilin, stupefied.

The girl laughed and raced across the hall. She hugged Meilin. "My friend! You're here!"

Conor frowned. "What's going on?"

Song gestured to Kana. "Chains? Really, Kana? Please free Meilin and her friends."

Kana bowed and drew out a key. A minute later Conor was rubbing his wrists as the manacles were unlocked.

Song snapped her fingers. Servants appeared from the edges of the room, carrying plates piled with food. "You all look starved," she said. Song picked a spiced bun from one of the trays and handed it delicately to Meilin. "As I

remember, you seemed to like these quite a bit! I had them specially prepared."

Beside Conor, Rollan grabbed up a chicken leg. "Ship food does leave a lot to be desired."

Meilin didn't seem to have an appetite. She placed the bun back on a nearby tray. "Princess Song ... what's going on?"

The girl turned suddenly. "*Empress* Song, don't you mean?"

Meilin nodded, taken by surprise. Slowly, she bowed to the girl. "My apologies, Your Majesty."

Song picked up a grape. "Anyway, I'd think it was obvious what's happening. The Oathbound are retrieving the four Greencloak relics. And funny enough, it seems that the last one has been right under my nose." She bit delicately into the grape, smiling at its sweetness.

Meilin grimaced. Her eyes flicked to Kana. "I don't understand. The relics are symbols of the Greencloaks. Now that you have us, why aren't we on trial? Why chase the gifts?"

Song laughed indulgently. "Because I want them."

Conor stepped forward. "Your Majesty, the Greencloaks didn't murder the emperor. We're innocent. Those people who rushed the Citadel were impostors!"

"Fakecloaks killed your father!" Rollan chimed in.

Empress Song nodded, her eyes bright with understanding. "Of course they did." She popped another grape into her mouth, then smiled. "I *hired* them to kill him."



3

EMPRESS SONG

MEILIN STARED AT SONG. HAD SHE HEARD HER correctly? Song had ordered her own father's death?

"That ... that can't be," she said. Song was a sweet-natured, quiet girl. She'd been devastated by the emperor's death. No, Song couldn't do anything like that. She was a sensible, obedient daughter, even in the face of the emperor's sternness.

Wasn't she?

Yet as Meilin watched Song, there was a hardness to her expression, a ruthlessness even. Meilin recognized it easily; she saw the same rebellious light in her own eyes whenever she gazed into a mirror.

Meilin had also been brought up to be a sensible, obedient daughter, and look where she was now. Look at the friends she had. The shepherd, the huntress, and the scoundrel. Hardly the right sort of company for a noble lady of Zhong.

The Oathbound gathered around Song. Kana whispered while Song looked curiously toward Cordelia, who still dripped with seaweed.

So these were the people Song had put *her* trust in.

Meilin stepped forward. “You planned this from the very beginning?”

Song patted Kana’s shoulder. “Longer than you imagine. Kana and I have been friends since childhood. She understands me.” The empress paused as she looked back at Meilin. “Just as you and I understand each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re the same, Meilin. My father was cruel and uncompromising. He held me back, just because I was a girl. Can you honestly say it was different for you?”

“I ... I don’t know what you mean.”

Song glowered. “Don’t lie, Meilin. Not to me. We’re so alike. We’ve both had to tread strange, sometimes painful paths to reach our goals. I didn’t have the Greencloaks to carry me away from all this, to train and encourage me. I had only Kana ... and my father.”

Meilin blushed with shame. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Song nodded. “I was good at hiding my true self. We both were. Remember the day your father brought you to the palace when we were younger? We were both so stiff and demure, weren’t we? Who could have guessed at the ferocity concealed by our makeup and silks? We hid even from each other.”

There was a scuffle behind them. For a moment Meilin worried Conor had gotten into another fight with Cordelia, but he was beside her, looking just as stunned.

Instead, Oathbound soldiers dragged in three more prisoners.

The three elder Greencloaks.

Kofe shook off one of the guards as Lady Cranston and Salaman were pushed forward. Even in chains, even after the days of rough travel and rougher treatment, they stood tall and unafraid, dominating the room.

But where was the crazy old man? Last time she’d looked he’d been on Kofe’s back.

Pride swelled in Meilin's chest, and she raised her head. She hardly knew the three, but their defiance filled her with hope.

"I *am* sorry that the Greencloaks are casualties in all this," Song said. "Your order has done much good. But perhaps for Zhong to move forward, it's best that we escape your shadow."

"Is *that* why you framed us?" Abeke asked. "You could have just spoken against us at the Citadel."

The empress shook her head sadly. She turned, drifting back to the end of the hall. "It's nothing so grand or complicated. You just had something I wanted. Something your order would never part with peacefully. Thanks to you, Meilin, and your friends, I now have three of the Greencloaks' relics." Song settled back onto her throne. "But what I've always sought is the Dragon's Eye."

"To do what?" Meilin asked.

Song glanced to the open window overlooking the beach. Then she turned back toward the others. Slowly, she pulled back on the collar of her dress. A pale tattoo was curled at the base of her shoulder. There was a flash of brilliance, and then a long, green shape stretched out before the throne, wearing a simple leather collar. "I believe you've met my water dragon, Seaspray."

Meilin and the others gaped.

"You—you have a spirit animal!" Meilin stammered. "How was this kept secret? And *why*?"

Song frowned down at the creature. "Father insisted. Ambassador Ying, the Greencloak who administered my Nectar, was sworn to secrecy on pain of death. Perhaps Father worried I'd be tempted to join the order. You must know the stories of the ancient water dragon. It's second only to Jhi in our legends. I think Father wanted to announce such an auspicious pairing on his own terms: to

claim I was the nameless hero reborn. Until, that is, he discovered the truth about my animal *partner*."

Song scowled. The water dragon at her feet slowly lifted his head, blinked, and then drooped again, curling lazily into a ball. "Pathetic, isn't he?"

"No spirit animal is pathetic," Meilin replied hotly. "You're lucky to have one and should remember that."

Song wasn't listening. "No matter what I did, our bond never produced the power or majesty of the ancient hero's. Father always told me the daughter of an emperor should have a greater creature. Something worthy of her status. Not an overgrown lizard who cares about nothing but basking in the sun."

Song took a deep breath, only just maintaining her composure. "But with the Dragon's Eye, I can make Seaspray better. The ancient water dragon could command the sea. Now *that* would be power worthy of an empress, don't you think?"

Rollan spoke. "Control the sea? Why? To catch bigger fish?"

Song's eyes sparkled. "Of a sort."

Meilin racked her memory for legends of the mythic warrior and his water dragon. They were little more than fairy tales, but she'd been told them all when she was little. There were great adventures, the warrior riding on the back of his beast. They dined under the sea and towed ships through storms and ...

... raised tsunamis to destroy their enemies.

One had wiped out an army of evil giants, covering the battlefield with waves over a hundred feet tall. Meilin's nanny had laughed at such a ridiculous tale—there were no such things as giants. Yet all legends grew from a kernel of truth.

But creating a tsunami? Was that even possible?
Was the Dragon's Eye that powerful?

"I must thank you for getting me three of the relics," said Song, bringing her attention back to them. "The crown, the jewel, and the sword will all help consolidate my rule. And once I have the Dragon's Eye, my position as empress will be unassailable."

Rollan folded his arms. "If you think we're going to help you get it, then you're insane."

"Not you." Song pointed at the three other prisoners. "They'll get it for me. Won't you?"

Kofe grunted. "We don't make deals with usurpers."

Song flinched. Then she forced a crooked smile onto her lips. She gestured to one of her Oathbound soldiers. "Throw the scrawny one out the window."

"Hey!" yelled Rollan as the soldier grabbed him around the waist.

Meilin tried to jump forward, but her legs were knocked from under her by another Oathbound. He stood over her, a spear pointed over her heart.

Rollan fought hard. He kicked and bit and pulled at his captor, but the soldier shrugged off his attacks with little effort. The window was full height, and wide open. They were a hundred feet above the sea and the jagged rocks that lay at the foot of the cliffs.

The soldier lifted Rollan high over his head.

"Your spirit animal is Essix, isn't she?" Song said. "It's a shame she never taught you to fly."

She nodded at the Oathbound.

"We'll do it!" shouted Kofe. "Put the boy down."

Meilin held her breath. She'd never imagine Song could be so evil. This girl before her was a stranger, nothing like the princess Meilin thought she'd know.

The soldier still had Rollan overhead. A draft pulled hungrily from the window, as if trying to tempt the guard.

Song gestured to the floor. "Put the boy down."

The Oathbound dropped Rollan heavily to the marble floor.

Meilin was beside him in an instant. She took hold of him and brought him to his feet.

He gave her that smirk that she knew too well. His dark brown hair had grown long the last few weeks and hung over the side of one eye. She brushed it aside. "Are you all right?"

His eyes glistened as they met hers. "I am now."

Song gave a mocking snort. "How very touching. The noble and the peasant. Honestly, Meilin, I thought you had taste."

Face pale, Rollan gazed at Song with pure hatred. Meilin feared he would attack her, despite the plentiful guards. But then he looked over at Kofe. "I'm sorry."

The big man merely shrugged. "Greencloaks look after one another. No need to be sorry about that."

Meilin frowned at Song. "If the Dragon's Eye is here, why don't you send the Oathbound to get it? *They're* your allies, after all."

Meilin saw Sid go pale. Even Cordelia looked hesitant. Kana and Song exchanged a look that seemed to communicate something, though Meilin couldn't interpret what it was. Kana gave a small shake of her head.

It dawned on Meilin then. The princess knew the whereabouts of the Eye, so why *didn't* she already have it?

Meilin snorted with contempt. "I see. Your allies are afraid. That's what happens when you have to buy loyalty, Song, rather than earn it."

Song rolled her eyes. "Let me stop you there, before you embarrass yourself by prattling on about things you don't understand. The Oathbound may be mercenaries, but Kana and I have been friends since we were young children. We dreamed and planned for this day *together*. Why waste any more of my own forces on this? Especially when victory is so close."

Song's expression was smug, but by the way she'd said "any more," Meilin suspected the empress wasn't being truthful.

Then it struck her. Song *had* tried the Oathbound, but they'd failed.

That was why she was using the Greencloaks. Kofe, Lady Cranston, and Salaman were exceptional. After all, they were senior Greencloaks. If anyone could retrieve the Dragon's Eye—hidden by the very first Greencloak himself—it would be them.

Meilin just hoped the three could buy enough time doing it. Every moment the Eye remained out of Song's hands was another moment for Essix to summon aid. It seemed to be the only hope they had.

Fly fast, Essix.

"It seems you've planned everything," said Abeke. "Yet you won't succeed."

Song laughed. "Oh, and tell me why. Please, I'm fascinated."

Abeke looked to the three Oathbound. "One is measured by the company she keeps. And you, Song, keep very poor company."

Song's jaw tensed. Meilin wondered if Abeke's words had pushed the usurper too far.

But the empress forced herself to relax. "Yet here I sit upon the throne. And there *you* are."

The Oathbound gathered around Meilin and her friends. She took hold of Rollan's hand.

Song nodded to Kana. "Lock them up somewhere deep and dark."



4

CHIEF UGO

BRING ME MY ROBE," SONG ORDERED. "THEN TELL THE Niloan delegation to enter."

Two servants helped her put on the yellow imperial cloak. They draped the long sleeves to hang down to the floor and carefully fastened its golden clasps up to her neck.

The collar choked her, but Song couldn't, *wouldn't* alter it. This was what the ruler of Zhong wore.

The robe was heavy, cumbersome, and hot. How had her father been able to wear it all day long? She felt as if it would crush her.

"The crown. Quickly."

The servants lowered it very carefully onto her brow. Song made sure she kept her head still and her neck straight. The first time she'd put the crown on, it had fallen off with a spectacular clamor. The looks of horror on the nobles who'd been present had been crushing.

An ill-omened start to her rule.

Song settled herself onto the throne.

Her father's throne.

She shifted, trying to get comfortable. This didn't suit her, either.

He'd made it look so easy.

Her heart fluttered. It wasn't pain, not quite, but it hurt. Her father had been so accomplished at everything, it seemed to her. But she'd struggled at it all. At all the courtly arts. She'd seen the looks of disappointment, brief at first, but longer as she grew older, the shakes of his head when she'd not measured up to his impossible ideal. She'd hid her tears from him, knowing they'd only confirm his belief that she was a failure. Only Kana had witnessed those.

She'd wanted him to be proud of her, just *once*.

Song pressed her hand upon the carved armrest of the throne. *Her* throne.

"Are you proud now, Father?"

Kana turned to her. "Did you say something?"

Song didn't dare shake her head; the crown would fall off. Instead she smiled at her friend. Her *only* friend. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Kana."

Kana touched her hand. "We're in this together, Song. As always."

The Niloan delegation was unexpected. Their ship had arrived last night. Song had tried to delay seeing them until she could get her hands on the Dragon's Eye, but the delegation was growing impatient.

Once she had the Eye, Song would have it added to the front of the crown. Then everyone would immediately see how powerful a ruler she was.

Greater than her father.

Brunhild the Merry, Song's Oathbound attendant, leaned close to her side. The woman was as dour as her ironically chipper title might suggest, but Kana had assigned her especially before enacting their plan to frame the Greencloaks. Whatever Brunhild lacked in personality, she

was watchful and competent. "Chief Ugo is a cousin to the High Chieftain," Brunhild whispered. "He is here to demand—"

"Demand? No one demands anything of me," snapped Song. "I am the Empress of Zhong."

"Of course you are." Brunhild cleared her throat. "He's here to *request* leniency for the Greencloaks. It appears he and Olvan were friends in their youth. Old loyalties are hardest to break."

"Impossible. The Greencloaks are criminals. Olvan the worst of all."

Song met the Oathbound woman's gaze unflinchingly. Brunhild had played her part in the lie regarding the emperor's death, and had even worked behind the scenes to create Kana's false history, transforming her into "Anka" and allowing her to infiltrate the Greencloaks.

If the true story of their plotting ever emerged, it wouldn't just be Song whose life was destroyed. The Oathbound would go down with her.

The doors opened and the Niloan diplomats entered.

Chief Ugo was a giant. He stood a head taller than even Brunhild. He wore flowing robes of blue and yellow, and his massive arms were encircled with gold bands. A necklace of lapis lazuli wrapped his immensely thick neck.

Song could see how he'd been friends with Olvan. They had the same presence, a mixture of physical power and charisma.

She sat a little straighter.

Behind the chief were three others, his advisers. One she recognized: a trade minister who'd regularly visited her father. The other two—a tall man and an elegantly dressed woman—she knew nothing about.

None looked happy.

Chief Ugo stopped a few feet in front of the throne and gave a curt, shallow nod. Hardly the bow that was

customary when greeting the empress of a major nation.

Song bit her tongue, even as she glanced at Brunhild. She could order Ugo to his knees, if she wanted.

"We are not used to being kept waiting," snapped Ugo.

"Kingdoms do not run themselves," replied Song. "I was busy. What do you want, Chief Ugo?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead he cast his gaze across the assembled throng of Oathbound guards, a mild sneer of contempt on his lips. "I see you keep a very different court than your father's."

"My father's court was old and useless. Zhong needs new ideas."

"Perhaps ..." His eyes locked on Kana, watching blankly from the far corner of the space. "But the Oathbound were never meant to serve as a government. Nilo is grateful for their help in protecting the High Chieftain, but they're soldiers. We are now in peacetime."

"These are my most loyal allies," said Song.

"These mercenaries?" said Ugo. "I see you have Cordelia the *Kind* among your court."

Cordelia bowed with a mocking smile. "I'm honored you know of me."

"Don't be. I've heard much of your *kindness* as you tracked the Heroes of Erdas across Eura. Villages burned. Lives ruined."

Song gritted her teeth. "You traveled a long way just to deliver insults, Chief Ugo."

"I did not expect to have to address murderers when I arrived at the palace."

Cordelia unsheathed Wildcat's Claw in a flash. "What did you say?"

Ugo's gaze went cold. "You heard me."

He pulled back his sleeve, and a beast thundered into existence with a crack of light. A rhinoceros snorted, standing between him and the deadly Oathbound warrior.

Song's heart hammered as she clutched the throne's armrest.

The beast beat its hoof on the marble floor and the room shook. Its horn was over two feet in length, and the tip appeared as sharp as any dagger. Song imagined the horrific injuries it could inflict.

Sid shuffled away from Cordelia, as did Wikam the Just, giving a little whimper. Beside Song, Brunhild placed her hand on the hilt of her sword.

Song took a deep breath and stood. "Please, my friends. We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot. Ugo is right. We are *finally* a world at peace. We're all allies here. Cordelia, put the sword away."

Cordelia's eyes blazed as fiercely as the flames on her blade, but she sheathed it.

Chief Ugo walked to the rhino. The animal's tiny ears twitched as he patted its forehead. He whispered something and the rhino struck the floor hard, cracking it. Then it disappeared with a second flash. Ugo brushed his hand over the image of the beast, now transplanted onto his forearm. He swept around to face Song. "I came to speak on behalf of the Greencloaks—to argue for clemency. I know Olvan to be a good man, and I don't believe he was involved in the assassination of your father. The High Chieftain allowed me to come to you and plead my case." The man narrowed his eyes. "That *was* what I came to do, until I discovered you were holding Greencloaks here—including the young Heroes of Erdas! Why haven't you mentioned this to the other nations? The Heroes should be with their own in Greenhaven."

"The Greencloaks *murdered* my father." Song's face turned red with anger. "How dare you—"

"They are entitled to a *fair and open* trial before all the nations. I'll be returning to my home tomorrow to tell the High Chieftain of what I've learned here. I will expect word

that the Greencloaks have been released to Greenhaven by the time I arrive."

"Or what?" snapped Song.

Chief Ugo didn't answer. With one last, contemptuous glance at the Oathbound he swept around and left, his companions following. Two Oathbound guards closed the doors behind them.

Song hurled her crown at the door, where it shattered into several shimmering, delicate pieces. "How dare he? Doesn't he know who I am?"

All around the room, the Oathbound looked nervous. They refused to meet her gaze. This only made Song angrier. They all owed her everything!

She turned her attention to Kana, motioning her toward the throne. Song could count on Kana, at least. The young woman strode forward. Her chameleon must have been in its passive form, because the leader of the Oathbound was fully visible.

"Please, my friend," Song whispered as she arrived. "Deal with this troublesome chieftain."

"How, Empress?"

Song paused. "You know how," she said finally. "Make my problem disappear. Make it look like Greencloaks if you have to."

Kana glanced around the court, then leaned forward, right up to Song. "That would be unwise, Song. Few Greencloaks remain at large. People may grow suspicious ... and they might turn their gaze to us."

Song's own gaze darkened. "I see. Perhaps you are right."

So even Kana defies me.

"Then I will deal with Chief Ugo myself," said Song. "Once I have the Dragon's Eye."

"What do you mean?"

Song didn't answer her. Instead she strode across the long chamber to pick up the pieces of her crown. The thing was well beyond repair. "The Dragon's Eye gives command over the sea," she called back across the room. "It would be a shame if the chief's ship sank on its journey home, wouldn't it?"

Cordelia laughed. "I don't think rhinos swim very well."

Standing at the throne, Kana didn't look so happy. "Be careful, Song. Nilo is powerful. You need to be more cautious about which enemies you make."

"Cautious? If I'd been cautious we wouldn't be here. I'd be in my chambers, playing with dolls, and you'd be on the beach, guarding it from seagulls." Song took a deep breath, then bounced across the room, back to her throne. She took Kana's hand. "I'm sorry, my friend. I spoke in haste. Your prudence is right, of course. Just as it's always been. Arrange for more food and drink for our Niloan guests. Make them comfortable."

"And what about Chief Ugo's request?"

Song tossed the pieces of crown aside. "It's a long journey back to Nilo," she said. "Much can happen in that time."



ONE HOUR

“THIS IS EVEN WORSE THAN THE SHIP,” SAID ABEKE. “I didn’t think that was possible.” She squatted by the small grille at the back of the cell, watching the sun set over the sea.

They’d been down here all day.

Conor sighed. “Some heroes we turned out to be.”

Abeke continued to gaze out west. Seagulls circled over the surf, but she was searching for a falcon. When would Essix return? And what aid would she bring?

Far across that expanse was Greenhaven. Abeke feared what Song was planning for it, if she got her hands on the Dragon’s Eye. Meilin had told them about the ancient hero and his bonded water dragon—the stories of what they’d been capable of. If Song achieved only half the feats mentioned in the legends, then they were in deep trouble.

A small boat drifted along the bottom of the cliffs. Abeke could just make out a single rower—a fisherman, she supposed—struggling to keep his boat off the rocks. He was fighting hard and was clearly no sailor. She winced as one wave almost tilted the vessel over. Seagulls swooped over him, hoping to steal some of his catch.

What was he doing this late in the evening? He didn't have a lantern. He was too clumsy to be a smuggler. Abeke shook her head as he disappeared into the dark shadows of the cliffs.

She hoped he was a good swimmer.

"Someone's coming," warned Rollan.

Armored footsteps stopped at the iron-bound cell door. Keys rattled and the hinges groaned.

Brunhild glowered at them. She gestured with her sword. "Out. All of you."

Abeke narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

The woman pressed her lips together.

Conor shrugged and went to the door. "She did ask nicely, Abeke."

More Oathbound soldiers waited outside the cell. Abeke and the others were pushed along, and down. And down ... and down. The narrow, spiraling stairs seemed to go on forever. The deeper they got, the more Abeke was overwhelmed by the smell of fetid, damp air. Sickly green moss matted the dripping walls.

Eventually the stairs ended, and they passed through a roughly hewn tunnel and entered a large, irregular cave.

Song stood nearby, with more Oathbound beside her. To her right, Wikam the Just sneered as the Greencloaks entered. He was holding some kind of small box, covered in thick burlap. His vulture spirit animal was perched heavily on his shoulder, though the Oathbound didn't seem to even notice the weight.

"You took your time," Song said.

"We were busy," answered Rollan. "These games of 'I Spy' can get pretty intense."

How deep were they? Abeke wondered. Water dripped from above and pooled on the uneven floor.

The cavern appeared to be naturally formed. Abeke could just about hear the sound of the surf somewhere on the other side of the rock. Seawater seeped through the

cracks, and large puddles lay over the uneven stone. Apart from the stairs there was one other exit, a large, circular door almost twenty feet in diameter.

She'd never seen a door like it. Hundreds of animals covered it, all inlaid in precious metals and mother-of-pearl. Their eyes were gemstones, and their teeth and claws ivory.

It looked as if the entire wildlife of Erdas had been trapped upon the door. Tigers, elephants, swallows, and sharks—and every creature that flew, swam, crawled, or walked. They overlapped, merging together and then breaking apart. The wavering lantern light added to the sense of movement, as if the menagerie would burst to life any moment.

"What do you want?" asked Abeke suspiciously.

Song walked up to the door. "What do you think? The Dragon's Eye."

"You sent Kofe and the others to get it."

Song hesitated. A worried look flashed across her face. "They're not back."

Rollan laughed. "Maybe they found it and escaped. They could be a hundred miles from here by now."

Abeke doubted that was true, despite her fervent hopes. She looked back at the ornate door. It radiated danger.

A few of the soldiers carried in extra weapons and deposited them in a pile. Abeke glanced at Meilin, who seemed to understand where this was going.

Abeke folded her arms. "We're not going to get it for you."

Song met her gaze. "Shouldn't you discuss it with your friends first?"

"I don't need to."

"I could offer you anything you want."

"What we want is for you to go to prison for your crimes. For a long, long time."

"Or forever," added Conor. "Forever also works."

Song scowled. "What about your freedom? You get me the Eye, and I'll put you on a ship home. I promise."

"How can we trust the word of someone who kills her own family?" asked Abeke. "And where would we be safe, knowing what we know?"

"You're making things difficult, Abeke."

"Good."

Song shook her head. "I suspected as much. But this might motivate you. A little present from Wikam's vulture."

"No!" Rollan gasped from behind Abeke as Wikam pulled back on the burlap covering to reveal an iron cage.

Essix shrieked from within. The cage was so small that she couldn't open her wings. The gyrfalcon knocked at the bars in fury.

Rollan jumped forward, pulling down on his collar. "Essix, go into passive sta—!" Before he could finish, Brunhild knocked him to the ground with a hard slap.

Song nodded to Wikam, who scurried quickly out of the cavern.

Rollan pushed himself back up, his eyes burning with hatred. "Let Essix go!" he yelled.

A cruel smile twitched on Song's lips. "Oh, I will. *If* you do as I say."

Abeke glared at her. "How do we know you'll keep your word?"

"You don't. But if you refuse me, I'll have Essix's cage weighted down and thrown from the cliff top into the sea. I'll even let you watch. If she isn't smashed into a pile of bloody feathers upon the rocks, then ... well, let's hope she can hold her breath for a long, long time." The empress's pretty gaze flashed to Conor. "Or forever."

Rollan groaned in despair.

What could they do? Abeke looked at Rollan, at his pure misery. Her heart broke to see his pain. She would feel the same if they had Uraza in a cage.

Abeke turned to her friends.

They knew each other so well by now; there was no need to speak. Each would sacrifice their life for the other.

If Essix died, they might as well rip out Rollan's heart. Abeke couldn't let that happen.

She glanced back to the cavern door, where she saw the air begin to shimmer. *Kana*, Abeke realized, just as the Oathbound leader bled into view. Kana watched the team impassively, leaning beside the enormous door. Toey, her chameleon, crawled slowly across her shoulder.

"You won't get away with this," said Abeke.

Abeke had been looking at Kana when she spoke, but it was Song who answered. The empress looked surprised. "Oh? I think I just have. Gather your weapons."

Rollan stared at the empress. "If anything happens to Essix, I'll make you—"

"*Please*, no more melodrama," interrupted Song. "Just get on with it."

It took four soldiers to pull open the door. Immediately Abeke was struck by a hot, scorching wind.

Kana held up a tall candle, carved with even lines to mark the time. "You have an hour. I wouldn't try to escape. If you're not back with the Dragon's Eye, Essix goes for a swim." She winked. "Good luck."

Rollan gritted his teeth, trapping his rage.

Abeke gathered a bow and a quiver of arrows. She walked through the door. Her three friends, now also armed, followed just behind.

The tunnel ahead was dark.

"Remember—*one* hour," warned Song.

Then the door was pushed closed behind them.



CONOR TOOK A FEW MOMENTS TO GET USED TO THE darkness. The tunnel glowed faintly, with a greenish hue. He inspected the walls and picked off a handful of moss. It radiated a weak light, much like the glow of the sea at night.

"It's like being in Sadre again," Conor murmured. "How fun," he added with a sigh.

The others were all crowded around him. Abeke carried a bow, Meilin a sword, and Rollan had a spear. Conor had taken a staff. It wasn't a warrior's weapon like his usual ax, but the weight reminded him of a shepherd's crook. Conor felt reassured just gripping the smooth wood.

"Only one way we can go," he said. "Forward."

The hairs on his nape prickled.

He could see a stronger light ahead of them, and with it rose a strange, putrid smell.

"Come on, Briggan. I need some help."

Conor ran his fingers over the mark on his forearm and his skin stung with brief heat as Briggan emerged.

The wolf shook himself vigorously, spittle flying from his black lips. He yawned, then padded up next to Conor.

Abeke joined him. "Shall I call Uraza?"

"Maybe later. I need Briggan to sniff around a bit."

Briggan wrinkled his snout and growled.

"I know it smells bad," Conor said, "but is it dangerous?"

"You can get poisonous gases down in mines," suggested Meilin. "You're worried it's something similar?"

"That's what I want to find out," said Conor. "Kofe and the others came this way, and it didn't seem like much could take *them* down."

"Maybe Rollan was right," Meilin said hopefully. "Maybe they found another way out and escaped."

Conor looked over at her. "Is that what you think?"

"No," she replied in a small voice.

They marched on for a hundred yards or so. It wasn't easy to judge distance in the dark. The tunnel was naturally eroded, so it was crooked and fractured in places, leaving deep cracks within the walls and broken rocks underfoot. Stalactites large and small hung down from the curved roof. Small rivulets of seawater dribbled between the cracks. The putrid smell grew stronger as the tunnel opened up.

And there was something else, the smell of burning.

Was it mine gas? Back in Eura, miners took canaries down with them when they descended below the earth. The little birds would be the first to perish if poisonous gas leaked into the mines. Many deadly gases were undetectable to humans, but if the canary died, then the miners knew to evacuate to safety.

As a boy, Conor had always felt sad for the little birds. Without them, however, the humans had no way of surviving. But Briggan's nose was more sensitive than any human's—and so was Conor's when he had his wolf with him.

The air stung his nostrils and made his eyes water, but otherwise it didn't seem to hurt him.

They reached the mouth of a chamber. This space, too, had formed naturally, but craftsmen had worked it into something roughly cubic. On the far end, forty or so feet away, was an opening leading farther in.

Above the entrance to the chamber was a steel plaque, bearing a symbol of a flame.

"Strange," said Meilin.

Conor sniffed. The putrid smell swamped the air.

Briggan barked, and then the breath left Conor's lungs in a rush.

There was a body lying within the cavern.

Rollan gasped. "It's Salaman."

The Greencloak's body was burned. His cloak, or what was left of it, was black with soot. A strong smell of smoke lingered within the chamber.

"We've got to get him," said Rollan. He took a step forward.

"Wait," said Conor. "Did you see the marks on him? He's been badly scorched."

There were no fires that Conor could make out, but the walls themselves were sooty.

"There's a trap in here," he said. "But I can't see it."

What had killed the Greencloak?

Conor was sure the smell was part of the danger. The odor irritated his nostrils and the back of his throat. Its rottenness reminded him of ... what?

A swamp. It was the same earthy, decaying odor. Swamps trapped things: fallen trees, wayward sheep. There'd been that one time, way back, when he and his father had tracked down a lamb missing from the herd. They'd found it struggling in the mud, and the air had the same smell. His father had waded in to get it, then showed him a trick with the tinderbox. He'd lit a bit of char cloth with their flint and fire steel, and then ...

"The air catches fire," said Conor, remembering the burst of gas as his father had thrown the char cloth over

the patch. It had popped loudly and created a ball of fire, lasting only a second or two, but enough to singe his eyebrows.

Conor ran his fingers through Briggan's thick fur. "I think it would be safer if you rested on my arm."

The wolf sniffed the air one more time, then licked Conor's palm. A second later he was gone, and the mark was back on Conor's forearm.

"Look at the floor," said Meilin.

Metal tiles covered the floor. Most were rusty and badly arranged, corners jammed in at awkward angles and wedged tightly against each other.

Rollan snorted. "Whoever fitted those must have been breathing too many cave fumes."

Conor wasn't so sure. "Get behind me."

He took a step back, then, using his staff, pressed down on the nearest tile.

It depressed, the edges scraping together.

He drew the staff back. "The tiles are on springs. You step on them and they'll move."

"So?" asked Abeke.

Conor rubbed the edges of his hands together. "Steel on steel, Abeke. It makes sparks."

Meilin gasped. "Igniting the gas."

"We could climb around the edge," suggested Rollan, squinting at the room's borders.

"See those soot marks?" Conor had wondered the same thing. "That's what previous people have tried. If you slip, you hit the tiles hard, guaranteeing a spark."

Meilin put her hands on her hips. "Rope would be useful."

Conor had to agree. But they didn't have any.

The cavern was too wide to jump. The walls were too treacherous to climb. Conor reckoned there were about fifty paces across, fifty tiles. Running wouldn't work—the impact would strike sparks—and even moving slowly was

dangerous. The rusty edges of the old tiles might light up with even a small amount of weight.

"Where does the gas come from?" asked Abeke, getting down on her knees to look under the misaligned tiles. "I think I can see vents in the rock."

Conor nodded. "It's like a bog. Organic matter rots in some cavern below; the gas seeps upward and gets trapped here, waiting to be set off."

Abeke looked at the walls. "The cave is covered in that moss. Salaman must have climbed around, but lost his grip."

Meilin threw up her hands. "Then we're stuck!"

"No, we're not," said Conor.

"Then how do we get across without igniting the gas?"

"We don't." Conor grinned. "We set off the explosion."

"That's insane" was Meilin's reply.

"Maybe, but think about it. The gas isn't endless. It's made from rotting material. That takes time. If we set off one big explosion, then we can easily cross before the gas refills the chamber."

Conor thought it must have worked for the previous group of Greencloaks. They'd tried climbing around, but Salaman had fallen, setting off a burst. Then, as the gas had begun to pour back into the chamber, Kofe and Lady Cranston must have sprinted the rest of the way across.

Meilin didn't look convinced. "How long?"

Conor shook his head. "No idea. But that's what makes it exciting?"

"That's not the word I'd use."

Conor searched around the entrance until he found a large rock crammed between fissures in the cave. "Give me a hand with this."

Together, the Greencloaks were able to pry the stone free from the cave wall. With all four holding a corner, they carried it to the edge of the chamber and dropped it down.

The tunnel itself was irregular, with many nooks where the rock jutted out crookedly. Conor pointed at a particularly large stone outcrop. “Once we toss the rock, let’s take cover behind that, okay? When the first explosion has passed, we need to be quick. No hanging around—just over to the other tunnel as quickly as possible.”

Meilin still didn’t look convinced, but they were running out of time. How much of the hour candle had already diminished while they’d been chatting here?

Conor and the others lifted the rock up and shuffled to the edge of the opening. “On the count of three,” said Conor. They swung it back. “One ...”

The second swing was wider than the first. Conor felt as if his arms were being pulled out of their sockets. “Two ...”

The final swing was the widest yet. “Three!”

With four great cries, they hurled the rock as far as they could.

It crashed upon a circle of tiles and instantly the sparks flew. The explosion was quicker than Conor had expected. The area around the rock burst into flame and the chamber itself rumbled as the surrounding gas ignited.

“Take cover!” Conor yelled. The Greencloaks turned and fled back down the tunnel as the whole chamber filled with heat and flame.

Conor came last, and the final burst tore him off his feet. He tumbled over the stony floor as a sheet of flame passed over him, caressing the top of his shoulders with pain.

The air hissed and stank as the flames died down.

Before he even had a chance to get his bearings, Abeke pulled him up. “Now, Conor!”

Conor shook away the confusion and pain. He’d have time to suffer later. They needed to cross the chamber now.

The putrid smell was gone, proof the gas had been used up. Meilin and Rollan were already a few paces ahead, racing across the tiles. The metal squares creaked and

sparked, but did nothing more. There were a few pockets of flame in the chamber's uneven corners, however, where the gas still lingered. The air scorched and the tiles simmered with heat that Conor felt through his boots.

He reached the room's midway point. Meilin and Rollan dove through the far exit. They then turned and shouted encouragement. Abeke was ahead of him, leaping so lightly that the tiles hardly moved.

Conor stepped hard on a particularly rusty tile. The spring beneath the tile snapped, and he plummeted about six inches, tearing the skin off his shins before hitting the stone ground beneath.

The thick, stinking odor was returning. Conor tried to get up, but one step and he cried out in pain. He'd sprained his ankle badly.

"Come on, Conor!" yelled Abeke, now beside their friends at the chamber's exit.

Conor hopped forward. With his whole weight on one foot, the tile he landed on dipped and cracked out a shower of sparks. Small flames flicked between the metal sheets.

The explosive gas was refilling the chamber far quicker than he'd thought.

He hopped from tile to tile, dragging his sprained foot along. Each landing generated more sparks, and the flames grew thicker and lasted longer. His trouser cuffs caught alight.

"Run, Conor!" shouted Rollan.

Conor focused on his friends, all shouting and waving at him. He jumped along, ignoring the fires now rising all around him. The air began to hiss and pop. He was only a few yards away!

He dove, throwing himself the final distance into his friends' arms. The impact knocked all four of them backward with a thump.

Conor lay there, gasping. He felt a dull ache in his ankle and knew it would soon intensify into pure pain. But right

now he was alive and that was what mattered. He sighed with great, great relief.

Conor rolled over onto his back. When he opened his eyes there was Meilin, grinning at him.

"Well, you were right!" she said. "That *was* exciting!"



ROLLAN COULDN'T GET ESSIX OUT OF HIS MIND. THE image of his falcon trapped in that hideous cage was like a knife through his chest.

How could Song—how could *anyone* with a spirit animal themselves—do that?

Anger threatened to overwhelm him. It had taken all his willpower to stop himself from charging the guards the moment Essix had been revealed.

It would have been suicide, but at least it would have been something.

Instead they'd agreed to this ordeal, which seemed just as suicidal.

Rollan's clothes stank of smoke, and he was sure half his eyebrows were gone from that first explosion. So what was next?

He didn't care. He'd get through it, get through all the dangers. He would save Essix.

Jhi was tending Conor's bleeding leg. The panda had licked it clean and the tear was now closed. Using Meilin as support, Conor tested his weight on the twisted ankle. The grimace of pain wasn't exactly encouraging.

Meilin took out her sword and sliced up her cloak. "We need to knot it up tightly. By locking it rigid, you'll at least be able to walk."

Conor frowned. "The first test and we're already handicapped."

"Hey, we're still all here," said Rollan. "I bet the rest will be easy."

"Really?" Meilin arched an eyebrow.

"No. Probably perilous to the extreme, but you have to keep being positive, don't you?"

"You are truly impossible, Rollan."

He grinned at her. "And that's why you like me."

He laughed as she blushed, and Conor rolled his eyes. "I'm in quite a lot of pain, so can we save the romantic banter for later? If there is a later."

Rollan saluted. "Yes, sir."

A mournful wind blew down the tunnel. Air whistled through narrow cracks, and the farther they went, the stronger the gusts became.

Abeke was up ahead and she raised her hand. "Our next deadly danger is here."

Rollan stepped beside her. "Well. That's quite a drop."

The cavern opened into a shaft, a wide one. Above them hung hundreds of stalactites of all shapes and sizes. Far below were their stalagmite siblings, looking unpleasantly spear-sharp.

The gap between this side and the tunnel opening on the next had to be more than a hundred feet. The wind roared up through this strange, natural chimney. There was only one way across, and it made Rollan's heart sink.

Suspended above the spikes were a series of chains, arranged in pairs, with short wooden handles.

Five trapezes. The only way across was to swing from one to the other, five times.

The chains creaked in the wind. The nearest was a good ten feet away from them.

"Are those ... bones down there?" asked Conor.

He was right. Even from this high up, Rollan saw the rotten clothes and shattered skeletons of those who'd tried crossing before them.

He shook his head. "Even the best acrobat in the world couldn't do it."

"We have to try," insisted Conor.

"We try and we'll fail." Rollan sat down on the ledge. "Wouldn't it be easier if we just got down there and walked across? Then climbed up the other side?"

Conor leaned over. "Now that you mention it, it would."

Rollan stood up. "Let's do it."

Meilin looked over at Jhi. The panda peered over the edge, then sat down.

Meilin smiled. "Yes, I know what you mean."

She brushed Jhi's cheek and a moment later the panda was gone

Rollan paused at the ledge. "I hate to say it, but Kovo would be handy right now. He could carry us on his back all the way across, no problem."

"If he were in a good mood." Abeke was next to him, wiping her hands on her trousers. "And have you ever seen him in a good mood?"

"Fair point. More likely he'd tear us limb from limb."

Abeke rubbed her hands together. "Who goes first?"

"It was my idea." Rollan sighed. "So I suppose I'd better."

Slowly, Rollan dropped down to a lower ledge. Even before the Greencloaks, he'd been climbing for years—buildings mainly—but in the end it was simply a case of making sure you relaxed. People got scared and tired themselves out by gripping so hard their hands ached. Rollan was careful to use his legs to support his weight, rather than his arms, in order to conserve his strength.

He moved from ledge to ledge, constantly checking back to make sure the others were following him. Meilin and

Conor moved carefully downward, following the same route as him, but Abeke took another path, using her flexibility and nimbleness to stretch and read the most minute holds. Soon she passed him, winking as she swung from one hold to another. The wind pulled at him, as if trying to tear him away from the stone. It hummed across the rough, rocky surface, tugging at his clothes. The air was cold and damp, and the rocks themselves were blemished with moss. Rollan avoided those—vegetation could come away—and kept his grip on the rock itself.

His toes reached the tip of a stalagmite. Rollan carefully pushed away from the wall, leaping toward the column of stone. He grabbed onto the slippery stone and slid to a nearby foothold.

"You took your time," said Abeke, squatting on a rock with her chin on both fists.

"I just wanted to enjoy the view," he replied.

She grimaced. "Some view."

The floor of the cavern was uneven, dense with the limestone spikes and wavy razor-edges of stone. Nasty.

"Look there," said Abeke. "On the ledge."

It was Lady Cranston.

Rollan shinnied sideways across a jutting stalagmite and dropped down lightly.

He leaned over. "Lady Cranston? Are you—"

Her face was swollen, covered in large red lumps. Her fingers, too, were thick and puffy. No breath emerged.

"It wasn't the fall that killed her," said Abeke, joining him with a single springing step.

As Rollan's eyes got used to the gloom, he noticed something moving.

In fact, a lot of things were moving.

The others clambered onto the remains of a shattered rock nearby. Abeke scowled as she gazed below her. "What is that? The floor seems to be alive."

It was. The ground seethed with ants. Among the stalagmites were huge mounds, homes to these creatures. They covered the floor of the cavern in their billions.

Rollan brushed some inquisitive insects off the end of his boot, but one latched on. He felt its bite even through the leather before flicking it off.

Suddenly he knew what had happened to Lady Cranston. Rollan drew the cloak back over her face.

How many had come down here, over the many centuries? There were plenty of bones littering the bottom of the cavern. Who had these people been, once?

All for the Dragon's Eye. He was beginning to hate the relic. Was it worth the risk?

It is, for Essix.

Conor huffed loudly. "I thought it was too easy."

"We should have tried the chains," said Meilin. "Better than getting eaten by these things."

"With Uraza I might have been able to jump it," Abeke said. "But that wouldn't have helped the rest of you much. We're down here now, and we need to find a way across."

Rollan stared at Abeke. "What did you just say?"

"We need to find a way across?" she replied, puzzled.

"No, before that. About Uraza ..." Rollan glanced upward. "How far is it to the ledge? Far enough that you could release Uraza there?"

Abeke squinted. "It's farther than I've ever sent her...." she said. "But I think I could make it. Why?"

Rollan held out his spear. "I have this. Conor's got a staff. With Uraza's help, Abeke could *walk* across, using these as stilts. It's not far."

"*Stilts?*" Conor didn't look convinced. "It's far enough."

Rollan undid his belt and measured about three feet of spear. That would be enough to keep away from the ants. "It doesn't matter. Give me your stick, Conor."

If Conor wasn't convinced, then neither was Meilin. "And what are the rest of us meant to do?"

"Ride on my back, of course!" said Abeke, brightening to the idea. "I'll carry you over one at a time. Once I get you to the far wall, start climbing."

Abeke stretched out over the lip of the rock she was standing on, extending her arm as far as she dared. "Here goes ..." There was a flash of brightness that illuminated the cave, revealing even more teeming ants than Rollan had realized were on the cavern floor.

Uraza appeared on the far ledge. The leopard searched the rock around her, momentarily confused to find herself alone. Then she glanced down at Abeke and the others, far below in the pit. Uraza keened nervously, stalking back and forth across the ledge.

"We'll be there in a moment!" Abeke called up. "But I need your help, girl. Every bit of grace you can give me!"

Uraza sank to her stomach, staring hard at Abeke with her violet eyes.

"There is no way this is going to work," said Conor. But he handed over his staff and helped Rollan tie it to Abeke's leg. The girls lent scarves, and after a few minutes Abeke had the spear and the staff strapped to her legs. Both were tied on at two places, once at the foot and the other just below the knee.

"Knot them as tightly as you can," Abeke instructed. "They've got to take the weight of two of us without me sliding down."

"Got it," said Conor, adding an extra knot.

Rollan double-checked with a pull. It all looked good. "Lift her up."

The ants rippled around the base of the stilts as Abeke was tilted into the air. She swung her arms around in circles as she steadied herself.

She swayed wildly for a moment, the sticks clattering as she tried to keep standing. Rollan worried she wouldn't be

able to walk the whole distance in one go, but then with a deep breath, her footing grew steadier.

"Lightest first," she said, still clinging to Rollan's fingers.

Meilin shuffled closer. "I might as well get this over and done with."

"Up onto my shoulders," Abeke said.

"Do you think you can carry me?"

"Only one way to find out," she replied cheerfully. Rollan didn't need Essix's help to see that she was trying to hide her fear.

"Nice and easy, Abeke," said Conor. "Just get your balance first."

Meilin settled herself, with the help of Conor.

The knots slid an inch, but held.

If he hadn't been so terrified, Rollan would have laughed. He helped Abeke to turn around, so she was at least facing the right way. With any luck she'd stumble just far enough to drop Meilin to the ledge.

Ants crunched under each step. Rollan could see a few latch on, digging their mandibles into the hard wood.

Abeke looked as if she was sweating already, but she took a few more steps. "This must be how the rest of you feel all the time," she joked. "I'll never laugh at you for tripping ever again."

"This is the stupidest thing I've ever done," said Meilin, perched on her shoulders.

Rollan couldn't disagree.

Step, stumble, trip. The stilts clacked and crunched across the floor. By moving slowly, Abeke could make it to one rock, rest against it a few moments, then push herself toward the next, zigzagging her way across.

It was working.

A cheer from Meilin announced that they'd made it. She wriggled off, accidentally kicking Uraza's head in her scramble to get up onto the narrow ledge.

Abeke turned around.

"I might just be getting the hang of this!" Freed of the weight of another person, she crossed back to the boys in half the time. "You next, Rollan."

Rollan nodded, took a deep breath, and climbed up. "Hope all these muscles don't weigh you down too much."

Trip, trip, slip, and stumble, but now that Abeke knew the route, she made quicker time. Rollan tried not to be offended that his weight didn't seem to bother her. Sooner than last time, they were by the opposite wall. Abeke had even managed to bypass one of the stopping points.

Rollan attempted a bit more grace than Meilin had mustered while climbing the ledge. He failed. By the time he was seated beside Uraza, Abeke had already made it back to Conor.

"Come on," she said.

Conor paused. Rollan realized that the Euran boy was probably the heaviest of all of them. With a shrug, Conor slowly climbed up.

Abeke almost collapsed. "Empty those rocks from your pockets first!"

"I haven't got any!"

The knots slipped another inch or two.

"Then how can you be that heavy?"

Conor sniffed. "Muscle mass. Now giddy-up."

Off they went, but with each step the knots loosened some more. Even worse, Rollan could see that the scarf on Abeke's left foot was unraveling faster, tilting the two perilously to one side. Conor tried to compensate by clambering more onto Abeke's right shoulder.

The weight on her neck must have been agonizing. Breath hissed between her clenched teeth, but she was going to make it.

Then Abeke screamed.

Beside Rollan, Uraza leaped to her feet, her yowl echoing throughout the cave. Abeke winced, glancing down at her shin.

"The ants!" she shouted.

They'd climbed the stilts, and the boldest were making their way up her boot. Abeke stomped down hard to try and shake them off. A few fell, but more hung tenaciously on.

Rollan's heart leaped as he watched his friends teetering so close, but so far. Too many Greencloaks had died for him already. He couldn't bear to see Abeke and Conor swallowed by ants for him and Essix. "Abeke, come on!" Rollan hollered, straining his hand out.

But it was too much to handle. The weakened knots, the weight of Conor, the ants. Abeke missed her next rock and the right stilt pitched hard. Suddenly both she and Conor were tilting. Conor tried to grab a nearby rock, but only brushed his fingers along it.

A hand shot past Rollan's face, locking around Abeke's collar. Rollan saw Meilin straining to hold their friends up as she gripped Uraza by the tail. The cords in Meilin's neck stood out, and Uraza looked about as unhappy as he'd ever seen her, but it had bought them some time.

Rollan quickly wrapped his arms around Meilin's waist and pulled. Together, they put every ounce of will into pulling their fellow Greencloaks out of the sea of ants.

With a terrified bellow, Conor jumped off Abeke and clawed his way onto the ledge.

Relieved of his weight, Meilin easily pulled Abeke up, even as the knots on her stilts finally frayed apart.

"The ants!" she shouted, and the three others quickly swatted them off and tossed them away. Abeke's calves were bright red and bleeding from the small bites, but she was alive. Miraculously, they all were.

Conor grinned at her. "Nice job, pony girl."

Uraza glared at him, rubbing her face against Abeke's arm, but the girl merely laughed.

"*Neigh!*" she said.



FALLS

“**W**HAT IS THAT NOISE?” ASKED MEILIN. “IT SOUNDS LIKE thunder.”

Rollan paused to listen. “Underground?”

Meilin checked on her companions. Abeke was retying the bandage around Conor’s ankle. Rollan looked anxious. How much time had passed? Was it an hour, or did they still have time to get back and save Essix?

But they couldn’t go back empty-handed. They needed the Dragon’s Eye.

Then what? Meilin hated the idea of Song having her hands on something so powerful, yet she couldn’t allow Essix to be killed. It was bad choices either way.

Conor stood up and tested his weight on his injured foot. “That’s not too bad.”

Abeke agreed. “The swelling’s gone down. And nothing’s broken.”

Meilin gestured along the tunnel. “Shall we move on?”

The noise grew louder, from a thunder to a deafening roar. The tunnel itself filled with mist as they moved cautiously along. The walls and ceiling dripped moisture, collecting in puddles.

Then, foot by foot, the tunnel ended and the source of the cacophony was revealed.

Rollan gasped. "Wow."

A waterfall roared just before them. Meilin and the others stood in a side exit, winding out from behind the fall. The tumbling wall of water cascaded down, creating the earsplitting din.

Meilin peered up, trying to find the source of all this power. "There must be a crack in the roof of this cavern. There are plenty of rivers draining out into the sea; this one's just underground."

Abeke balanced on the lip of the tunnel opening, looking over. "There's a pool down below."

That made sense. Meilin nodded. "It collects there, running off through other cracks into the sea."

Conor hobbled up beside her. "The last challenge?"

"Let's hope so."

There was something else down there. Through the ever-changing sheet of water, Meilin could see there was some sort of platform far below, too neat and angular to be natural. And what was on it? A mosaic? But of what? She could just about make out two figures, both with some sort of scaled skin. One was a creature, the other a man. A scaled man?

No, it wasn't skin but armor, the scale mail worn by Zhongese warriors from centuries past. And the creature was a water dragon—just like the one she'd seen out on the beach—but this creature was immense.

"If the Dragon's Eye is anywhere, it'll be here," she said. "That's a shrine below. Dedicated to the ancient hero who created the bond token."

Conor brightened. "Then let's climb down and grab it."

"Will you mange with that leg?"

"It's not like I have any choice, is it?"

Meilin glanced over the edge. It was a long way down. Water trickled over the rocks, making each one slippery.

She worried for Conor. For all of them, really.

Rollan was already dangling over the ledge, looking for somewhere to plant his feet. "We can't waste time up here." Purchase found, he started his descent. Abeke followed and then Conor, winking first. Meilin sighed and took a deep breath.

Don't think about the distance, the drop. Take it one inch at a time.

Water sprayed over her back as she took to the rocks. It ran between her fingers and along her arms until she was soaked through—and she hadn't even gone ten feet. Meilin didn't look down to check the others. She needed to concentrate on footholds and handgrips on the route down.

The noise of the water tumbling past, just a few feet away, vibrated all the way through to her bones.

Meilin had always been a talented climber. Heights never really bothered her—until their encounter with the Dasat of Nilo. Now unbidden images assailed Meilin, of archers aiming at her from below. She saw rocks tumbling from above.

And worst of all, she saw herself falling: except this time there was no Heart of the Land to save her.

Meilin's fingers ached.

How much farther?

"Hey! Meilin! You all right?" shouted Conor.

"No. Not really," muttered Meilin, resting her forehead against the cliff face.

"What?"

"I'm fine!"

"It's not much farther, that's all."

She just wanted it to be over. Meilin glanced down.

Her head swam. The others were waiting on the platform, waving up at her, but it looked like miles away!

She felt as if she hadn't moved at all, imagining the ledge was just a foot above her.

But it wasn't. It was just as far above her as the ground was below. She'd frozen in the middle of the climb.

Take a moment, gather yourself, then continue.

But Meilin couldn't force herself to move. Her fingers were numb, both from the effort of gripping and the cold water washing over them. Her soaked-through clothes weighed her down, so each limb moved sluggishly.

Panic set in. Meilin's heart raced. She couldn't still her hands from shaking. It was too far.

"You can do it, Meilin!" yelled Abeke.

She wanted to shout back at them to leave her alone!

Meilin stared at her left hand, forcing it to open. One by one, her fingers unclenched and she moved to a lower hold.

That's it. One ledge at a time.

There were plenty. She stretched out a foot, first balancing on the tips of her toes, then setting down her whole foot.

There. Now—

She cried out as her foot fell away underneath her. Her grip went and suddenly Meilin was hanging on by two fingers.

Abeke screamed.

Meilin stared at her hand. Water poured over her fingers and down her arm, dripping off her soaking sleeve. She saw the cracks along the wall and wondered why she hadn't picked a better place to hold on. She gasped as the water pounded against her.

Then, with awful inevitability, she watched as her fingers slipped from the rock.

Meilin's hold failed, and she was struck by the full power of the falling river as she tumbled into the cold, dark water.



She slammed into the pool hard. The momentum of the water spun her over and over, pushing her down deeper.

Meilin fought back, but it was no use; the churning waters totally dominated her. She forced her mouth closed, so as not to gulp in a mouthful of water. She needed what little breath she had. Meilin didn't know which way was up. She couldn't see anything in the surging mass.

Then a hand grabbed her. She instinctively latched onto the thick wrist as she was pulled.

Who was it? Conor?

But her hair covered her face, and she put all her energy into kicking along.

Meilin's lungs burned. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on. What if Conor drowned, too?

Then she broke the surface and gasped. How sweet the air tasted! It cooled her chest as more hands took hold and pulled her fully out of the water.

Coughing and gasping, Meilin lay down on the stone. She'd never been more thankful for solid ground!

As she wiped the water from her eyes she glimpsed a large figure sitting beside her.

"Kofe?" she sputtered. "You're alive!"

"Seems so."

"Thank you," she said. "You saved me."

"Wasn't me. Not with this." He showed her his bandaged leg. Seemed Kofe had also had some trouble on the rocks.
"It was him who saved you."

Confused, Meilin got to her feet. She was shivering in the chill of the cavern, but she was alive. "Him? Who?"

"Him."

She turned around.

The figure wore ancient scaled armor, the metal shimmering brilliant green and gold. He carried a curved sword with a jade handle in an ornate sheath made of black serpent skin. His long, dripping black hair hung over half his face, but he smiled at her.

Enjoy your swim, young lady? The man spoke Zhongese, but in a dialect she didn't recognize.

"Who are you?" Meilin hacked. She was still coughing up water.

I should ask who you are, disturbing my rest.

"Rest?" Meilin asked, dazed. How was there someone living down here? It felt as if her head was full of water. If she tilted sideways, maybe it would all pour out.

"Uh ... Meilin," Conor interrupted. He and the others were climbing into the cavern from the water, looking about as bedraggled as Meilin felt. "We can't hear anything that guy is saying. I think he's probably ..."

Meilin's mouth fell open as realization dawned.

The man smiled softly. *I am Xin Kao Dai, the guardian.*

"The guardian?" she asked. "Of what?"

He pulled back his hair, revealing the hidden half of his face. *Of this.*

Meilin gasped.

The man's left eye was a brilliant emerald.

They'd found the Dragon's Eye.



I called her Dancer Across Moonlit Waves, said the guardian, gesturing to the water dragon image at their feet. *Dancer for short.*

Meilin shook her head. "She must have been enormous. I've never see a water dragon so large."

The guardian merely shrugged. *We had many great adventures together. I lost my eye in one of them. Truth be told, I thought my adventuring days were over. But then we discovered the secret of bond tokens. A grateful emperor, I forget his name, had given me this jewel for saving his daughter, whose name I've also forgotten.* The spirit smiled sheepishly. *It seemed a fitting item to become our token.*

The Dragon's Eye was rather special. It not only made me more powerful, but Dancer, too.

Meilin sat cross-legged, captivated. She'd called out Jhi, and the giant panda was now wrapped around her, warming Meilin. All around her, her friends watched the spirit, while Conor helped tend to Kofe's leg.

"You said your name is Xin Kao Dai," Meilin said. "But that's the name of this city."

They named a whole city after me? How embarrassing. The spirit ducked his head humbly, but Meilin still thought he looked a bit pleased with himself.

"To be honest, your name was lost to time," Meilin said. "But the legends of you and your spirit animal have lived on. You know how to make bond tokens?"

Of course. That's something I haven't forgotten. I recorded the method, though of course it's extremely dangerous. The scroll still sits in a jade tube within my chambers.

Meilin sat up. "Please," she said, "come with us. Help us defeat Song. The Oathbound have other bond tokens, stolen from our order. We can't let her have the Eye."

My time has gone, Meilin, said the guardian sadly. *Dancer swims in a distant sea, far beyond this world. I've been waiting to join her. What marvels we'll see there.*

Meilin heard the longing in his voice. She knew how powerful a spirit animal bond could be—just the feeling of Jhi pressed against her filled her with reassurance. Yet the guardian talked about it with such ache that she felt tears growing. "Why haven't you joined her?"

I've been waiting. He laughed. *For you, apparently. Not quite the heroes I had in mind, but the Great Panda Jhi is with you. I feel entirely happy. You will do well.*

"We can't take your eye!" exclaimed Meilin. "It's, well, your eye!"

Xin Kao Dai sighed. *The things I wish to see are beyond mortal sight, young lady.* He stood up and faced the waterfall. *We must not linger, small warrior. You have places to be, as do I.*

"Yes," Meilin responded with little enthusiasm. "We've still got to get all the way back."

The guardian smiled. *There is a secret route back to the entrance. It would be unfair to force you to go through the trials all over again in reverse.*

"Secret route?" asked Meilin, feeling more relieved than she could have imagined. The climb down had almost done her in, and the prospect of having to climb back up had chilled her through. "Where?"

The guardian clapped once.

The sound echoed around the tall underground cavern, multiplying again and again, until it sounded from all directions. It was as if hundreds of hands were clapping, thousands even.

The water parted. It did not stop, nor lessen in power, but separated into two jets, opening up a gap right into the cliff face.

And a large doorway. Lights shone from within.

"You live there?" asked Meilin.

When there was no reply she looked around.

The guardian had vanished.

The others were just as bewildered, but Rollan stepped toward the new opening. "Essix is running out of time."

The chamber behind the waterfall was immense. Statues lined either side of the doorway. Meilin and the others entered in solemn silence. There was a single light shining from the darkness of the roof, but Meilin couldn't work out the light source. It shone steadily upon a throne of pure white jade.

Supported by Conor and Rollan, Kofe limped behind. He took a deep breath and let out a low whistle. "Will you look

at that?"

Upon the throne sat a dusty skeleton in rusted scale armor. In one hand, the figure held a sword, in the other an ornate scroll tube.

And within the eye socket of the skull rested a glowing green gem.

The Dragon's Eye.



9

THE DRAGON'S EYE

“**W**HERE ARE THEY?” DEMANDED SONG. “THEY’RE UP to something. I know they are.”

She shifted her attention to the hour candle. There wasn’t much of it left.

Had they failed, too?

Song spun around at the Oathbound. “You must go in and find me the Dragon’s Eye. Now. That’s an order!”

Sid shifted awkwardly. He gazed over at Kana.

“Don’t look at *her*,” Song snapped. “I am in charge. Do as I say.”

Kana approached. “Song, there’s still time on the candle. They may still return with the Dragon’s Eye.”

“They had better,” muttered Song.

Cordelia leaned against the cavern wall, the Wildcat’s Claw unsheathed. The Heart of the Land hung from Kana’s neck, and Sid wore the Stormspeaker crown with a look of smug satisfaction.

Song circled the chamber jealously. This plan had been her idea, and yet *she* was the one without a bond token. What had the Oathbound done to garner such treasures? Merely followed her orders. They had sacrificed nothing.

A sharp pain cut her heart as she thought of her father.

That had been necessary. He was a weak ruler and a merciless father. Zhong would become great again with her on the throne.

The throne ...

She didn't dare tell the others, but the nightmares were getting worse. They were coming every night now, getting stronger, more vivid, *bloodier*.

He would be sitting there, on the throne, covered in those awful wounds. He would just sit there, looking at her with cold, accusing eyes.

Song wanted to destroy the throne, to toss it through the window and let it sink to the bottom of the sea. It would be cathartic, but she suspected it wouldn't stop the dreams. Her father would just appear again, elsewhere. She heard his footsteps in the corridors, glimpsed him from the corner of her eye. She'd see him momentarily walking along the gardens, blood dripping on the flowers.

He could be here right now....

"I did what I had to do, don't you understand that?" she muttered.

"Song?" Kana frowned. "Did you say something?"

"Where are they?" snapped Song.

The falcon shrieked from her cage.

"Oh, shut up," Song said exasperatedly. "You're even worse than Seaspray!" Kana put her hand on Song's arm, and she flinched. She cast her gaze over at the candle. "They don't have long."

"Why so impatient? You want the Dragon's Eye, don't you?"

"What sort of question is that?" Song faced Kana. "It's my destiny to have it. I have a water dragon, just like the ancient hero. I've read the old stories of what he did, what the Eye is capable of." She smiled. "Once I have it, no one will be able to stand against me."

Kana frowned. “Don’t you mean *us*? Remember our deal, Song. We’ve been planning this together. If it wasn’t for the Oathbound, your father would still be emperor.”

Song had to be careful. She still needed Kana and the Oathbound.

For now.

“Of course,” Song said, the tension dropping from her shoulders. “I’m so sorry, Kana. Forgive my impatience. You must think I’ve lost my mind. It’s just that victory is so close. To think the Dragon’s Eye was under our noses this whole time.”

She placed a hand on the Oathbound captain’s shoulder. “You’re my best friend. You’ve always been there for me, and I’ll do the same for you. But to make *all* our dreams come true, we’ll need the Dragon’s Eye.”

Kana’s eyes narrowed. “What can it do, exactly?”

“It’ll help us destroy our enemies once and for all. Starting with the wretched Greencloaks.”

Kana shook her head. “I don’t understand. The Greencloaks are *already* defeated. How will this destroy them?”

“The Dragon’s Eye gives you power over the sea, Kana. Can you imagine? The stories tell us that—”

“They’re just stories, Song. Probably exaggerated a hundredfold over the years. The bond tokens are powerful, but not *that* powerful.”

“*Yours* might not be. But the Dragon’s Eye is the most powerful of them all. And it was forged from a bond with a water dragon, just like mine. The ugly lizard might end up being useful for something at last.”

Kana looked at her worriedly. “You’ve won, Song. Once we have all the bond tokens, we need to consolidate your position, not seek out more enemies.”

“I have only ‘won’ when I’ve *destroyed* all my enemies,” Song replied. Was Kana going soft? Perhaps Cordelia

should lead the Oathbound.

Sid coughed loudly. "The candle's gone out."

So it had.

"Get the cage, Sid," Song ordered.

Sid looked over at Kana. Again.

Song gritted her teeth. "Didn't you hear me?"

Kana gave a slight nod and Sid picked up the cage. Essix flapped her wings against the bars; she knew she was in danger.

A Great Beast? Well, they'd find out how "great" she was when they threw her into the sea.

Perhaps it was for the best that Meilin had failed. Ever since the defeat of the Devourer, Song had followed the successes of the young Heroes of Erdas, marveling at how a group of children could achieve so much in so short a time.

If she was honest, Song had been a little afraid of the young Greencloaks. When she'd first learned of them—how they'd visited the Great Beasts and collected their talismans—she'd thought the stories merely that: stories. Then they'd defeated the Devourer and there was no denying their abilities.

Was that when Song had first thought about her own ambitions? She was the daughter of the Emperor of Zhong. She should be greater than Meilin, yet it was the younger girl whose fame covered Erdas from Amaya to Stetriol. Hers and the others': Abeke, Rollan, and Conor.

How could a mere servant and shepherd be more renowned than Song?

But their story had ended today.

"Take the bird to the cliff top," she ordered. "Then throw her into the sea."

"You will hand her back to me, right now."

Rollan stood in the cavern doorway, arms folded across his chest. Meilin, Abeke, Conor, and even the elder Greencloak Kofe were beside him, all alive!

Conor limped forward and his clothes were singed, but otherwise none of them looked badly injured. Song was almost disappointed. How could they all have survived?

It was obvious.

Song narrowed her eyes. "You've failed."

Meilin held out her fist, then opened it.

Song gasped.

An emerald glowed in her palm. Light radiated from its many cut faces, bathing the cavern in green, shifting pools.

"The Dragon's Eye?" Song whispered, her heart racing. Could it really be?

"Release Essix," demanded Rollan. "Now."

Song couldn't take her eyes off the glowing gemstone. It was smaller than she'd imagined; the drawings had made it so grand-looking, but it was smaller than a pigeon egg.

How could such a small thing have so much power?

"Give it to me."

"Essix first."

Song flicked her hand to Sid. "Open the cage."

The nod from Kana was almost imperceptible, but it was there.

Song's guts twisted. Kana was getting ideas above her station.

Essix flew across the cavern to Rollan, landing on his outstretched arm. The boy stroked the bird's crest. The love they had was unmistakable.

Song didn't feel that way toward her own spirit animal, but Seaspray wasn't a Great Beast.

Suddenly Essix's wings rippled. The gyrfalcon disappeared with a flash, leaving her mark on Rollan's chest.

Jealousy dripped into her heart like black bile. Sometimes it seemed so thick she almost choked. Song often felt as if she had nothing—nothing of value or importance. She was the only child of the emperor, yet it was others who had what she wanted. Her "legendary"

spirit animal had always disappointed her father, while these four nobodies had summoned the Great Beasts. Song had a palace, an empire, but the Greencloaks' fame was boundless.

And they had the loyalty of each other. Song had the Oathbound, loyal only to gold. All across Erdas, minstrels sang of the feats of the Heroes of Erdas, of their bravery. No one sang about what she'd achieved.

Did they not understand the courage it had taken to murder her own father?

That would all change. Soon all Erdas would admire Song. Minstrels would write epics of her greatness. Song the Great. She liked the sound of that.

And she needed only one small thing to realize all her ambitions. Song thrust out her hand. "Give me the gem."

Reluctantly, Meilin passed it over.

"At last," said Song. "At last."

She held the stone up and turned it in the light.

Something swirled within the gem, as though there was life within the Eye. It moved in endless, weaving patterns. If she squinted, it could almost be a water dragon, one made of pure light.

"It will do you no good."

She turned to face the big Greencloak, Kofe.

His leg was bandaged, and blood soaked through the cloth. He looked pale, but the anger in his eyes filled him with strength.

"Oh?" Song asked mockingly. "Tell me why."

"The bond tokens aren't the treasures you think they are or hope them to be."

"They will make me powerful beyond all others," said Song.

"They will corrupt you," Kofe snarled. "Just as all power corrupts. You are the very proof of it."

Song tightened her grip on the Eye. “I won’t be lectured on the corrupting influence of power by a *Greencloak*. Your people have kept Erdas under your thumbs for centuries. My father kept me meek and powerless my entire life. *No more!*”

“I knew your father, Song,” Kofe said. “He was a fool. He belittled those he feared and envied. That includes the Greencloaks and it includes *you*, his own child.” Kofe’s face softened slightly, the hard lines easing. “You summoned a *wondrous* partner, but rather than foster your love for each other, your father drove you and your spirit animal apart. You don’t need to covet the greatness of others, Song. Cherish your own bond. See the great things *you already have* for what they are.”

Song paused, considering the Greencloak’s words. Then she grinned and held up the Dragon’s Eye. “What I *have* is the most powerful weapon in Erdas. And I intend to use it.”

Kofe’s eyes darkened. “Then you are as much a fool as your father. You must be stopped.”

“Oh? And by who? You?” Song laughed. The man could barely stand. “Do you want to try?”

“There’s no need. You’ll bring ruin upon yourself; it’s only a matter of time. What concerns me is the damage you’ll inflict on innocents before your own doom descends.”

“Careful, old fool. You dare threaten an empress?”

“Your father—”

“Shut up about my father!”

Kofe limped forward. “You must listen. He has poisoned y—”

Song screamed with blind fury.

It happened almost instantly.

Kofe took another stride toward her, and Cordelia flicked out the Wildcat’s Claw. She jumped forward, raising the sword as she moved.

Kofe turned, staring as the flames erupted along the steel, illuminating the wild, terrifying delight in Cordelia's eyes.

He raised his arms to protect himself, but how could he, against the Claw?

"No!" yelled Rollan.

Song covered her face. She expected a cry. A shout. Instead, it was deathly silent.

She looked.

Kofe stood, transfixed. He was clutching Cordelia, as if about to embrace her or crush her. He trembled. Blood trickled down his lips.

Cordelia faced him, both hands on the hilt.

The blade tip stuck out Kofe's back.

Slowly Cordelia drew the whole length of the sword out of his chest. Only then did Kofe drop to his knees.

Rollan rushed to the man's side. "No..."

"He—he brought it upon himself," Song stuttered as she stepped back from the pool of blood that was now spreading across the floor. "It was his own fault."

Rollan groaned as he put his head against Kofe's. The big man's eyes fluttered as the last of his life drained away.

Rollan stared up at her, his own eyes wide with sorrow and rage. "He was a good man."

"He was nothing," snapped Song. "And now he is even less."

She watched as the other Greencloaks gathered to Rollan. Meilin put her arm around him and joined him in tears. Conor knelt down on the opposite side of Kofe and softly closed his eyes. Abeke held the man's hands.

Watching the Greencloaks gather to mourn one of their own, Song felt suddenly and strangely alone.

Was there anyone who cared about her in this way?

She saw her reflection in the bloody pool. How twisted she looked, how grotesque: soaked through by crimes she'd committed. The image swam. It distorted into ...

Into the face of the emperor.

“No!”

Kana gripped her arm, suddenly bleeding into existence beside her. “Song. Are you all right?” she whispered. “Pull yourself together.”

Song blinked, shaking off the strange vision. What was she doing? Why should she be upset? She had the Dragon’s Eye. She’d won.

Won!

She smiled at Kana. “I’m fine. But thank you.”

“What should we do with them?” Kana asked. “Back to the cells?”

What indeed? It would take a mere nod of her head to have the Oathbound finish off the four children. No effort at all.

Perhaps she *should* kill them. They knew too much to ever be set free. And they were powerful, though perhaps they didn’t realize *how* powerful. If they joined her—joined the Oathbound—then maybe the Heroes of Erdas could still be spared.

But Song knew that was impossible. The look of pure hatred in Meilin’s eyes made it clear.

More than anything, Song needed to prove she was right. Right to go after the bond tokens, right to use the Oathbound, right to arrange the murder of the emperor. Once she’d proven *that*—once Meilin saw her precious Greencloaks shattered, saw the true power of the Dragon’s Eye—then Song would let Cordelia do what she did best.

Kana still stood beside her. “Let me take them back to the cells,” Kana said. “They’re no threat to you anymore.”

“The cells can wait.” Song couldn’t take her eyes off the Eye. She finally had the one thing she’d been seeking this whole time. Now she would test it. She wanted the others to see what she was capable of.

“Bring them down to the beach.”



A BEKE STOOD ON THE SHINGLE SHORE AND WATCHED Song summon her water dragon. The lizard appeared with a flash, then lay down to snooze on a sunny rock.

“Wake up!” Song kicked the animal. “Wake up!”

Abeke winced at the way Song treated her spirit animal. How could she be so cruel?

But Abeke could still picture the Oathbound guards dragging Kofe’s body away. More and more she was learning that cruelty was a part of Song’s true nature. The empress had hid it well, but now it was revealed and without restraint.

Song kicked poor Seaspray again, and it was too much for Abeke. She pushed past the guard who blocked her. “Stop it, Song!”

The guard thrust a halberd at her, stopping the blade just an inch from her chest.

Song waved him aside. “Let her approach.”

Abeke knocked the halberd away and marched up to the empress and her Oathbound allies.

Kana the Honest stood within arm’s length of Song. She kept her gaze on Abeke, ready for any sudden move. The

Heart of the Land hung from her neck. Next to her stood Sid the Generous, wearing the Stormspeaker crown, along with countless other stolen jewels. He looked absurd with so much ornamentation, yet still his eyes gleamed hungrily at the jewel in Song's hand. Finally there was Cordelia the Kind, grasping the deadly Wildcat's Claw.

Song held up the Dragon's Eye. The jewel radiated a bright green light. "Magnificent, isn't it?"

"Stop beating your water dragon, Song. Can't you appreciate how lucky you are to have a spirit animal?"

"Lucky? To have this?" Song scoffed and the dragon cringed. Clearly he was used to Song's anger.

Abeke squatted down and brushed her hand over Seaspray's scales. He trembled, expecting another blow, but eventually he realized she wasn't going to hurt him and nuzzled up against her.

"You really are quite lovely." His scales shimmered like oil on water, one moment green, then gold, then orange and purple. The water dragon gurgled with pleasure.

"He's weak and useless," snapped Song. She undid the chain around her waist and latched it to the dragon's collar.

"What are you going to do?"

Song gave the chain a sharp tug. "Make him better."

"Don't hurt him!" Abeke wanted to protect poor Seaspray, but Kana stepped in her way.

"You stay right there," she warned.

The poor water dragon knew something was wrong. He struggled as Song dragged him to the water's edge.

The waves splashed around the empress and her spirit animal. Song didn't seem to care that her elegant silk robes were getting covered in salt water. Instead she hunched down in the waves and held the Dragon's Eye in front of her own spirit animal.

The light from the orb brightened, bathing both girl and dragon in an eerie green radiance. The water dragon

stopped struggling and instead stared at the orb, hypnotized. The light from the Eye pulsed. Cold fear crept over Abeke's skin.

The waves seemed to hush and she held her breath.

Even the seagulls stopped their endless squawking. They fled the beach, sensing something disturbing.

"Come on ..." Song snarled. "Come on!"

The sky darkened as Seaspray began at first to twist, then thrash, at the end of the chain.

Song laughed as she held the Eye aloft. "That's it!"

"You're hurting him!" yelled Abeke.

Song didn't hear her. She stared, wide-eyed, at the dragon as he hissed in pain. Then he began to tremble all over, his scales undulating as the muscles and bones beneath began to strain. Seaspray threw back his head and cried out.

How could she do that to any creature, especially her own spirit animal?

Others came to the water's edge to watch Song and her water dragon. The creature thrashed violently in the waves.

Seaspray's cry throbbed as he swelled. His limbs twisted and buckled and grew. His tail splashed among the waves, thickening and lengthening.

Song laughed. "It's working! Can't you see?"

The water dragon rolled down the beach, as if trying to escape the pain racking his body. Song ran after him, still holding the Dragon's Eye ahead of her, its light concentrated on the lizard.

Abeke glanced to her sides.

Conor, Meilin, and Rollan all stood nearby, but the Oathbound were all totally focused on the spectacle.

She nudged Rollan. "Here's our chance."

Rollan peered sideways. "What's your idea?"

She tilted her head to a pocket of caves within the cliffs. "Hide out until dark. Then take one of those boats and try to get help."

"Go," he stated.

"I don't mean just me!" argued Abeke.

"You're the best runner. Go. Now."

"Rollan ..."

The water dragon sank under the water's surface. Song waded in. "Where is he?"

This was the best chance they'd have.

The soldiers entered the sea to help look for the dragon.

"Where is he?" Song screamed again, more forcefully.

A long, scaled spine rippled across the water. Some of the soldiers gasped; others hurried out to dry land.

Waves rose as something big swam toward the beach's edge.

The water dragon roared as he broke the surface and rose ... and rose.

Abeke gasped.

Song let out a triumphant shout. "I did it! I did it!"

The water dragon towered over her. Seaspray shook himself, covering the whole party in seawater.

Rollan glared at Abeke.

She nodded. Abeke slammed an Oathbound soldier aside and ran.

Uraza flashed onto the beach, then sprang forth with a terrifying roar. She swiped her claws along a soldier's leg, tearing off the armor plate as if it were paper. Her claws dug an inch into the flesh, enough to draw blood, a scream, and a tumble.

"Go, Uraza!" Abeke yelled, but the Great Beast was already far ahead of her, sprinting over the pebbles with all the speed and grace she had held in her supple body.

Despite herself, Abeke laughed. If only she could draw on more than a fraction of Uraza's power! Still, seeing her animal surge ahead encouraged Abeke to add more energy to her legs. She drew on their bond and felt her own steps growing long and sure.

There were a series of cave openings along the southern curve of the cliffs. That part of the beach was covered in huge chunks of rock, debris that had been eroded off the cliffs. Abeke could jump them easily and have plenty of places to hide.

Uraza was leaping from rock to rock. Abeke saw her tail disappear between two larger boulders, before the leopard dashed into one of the caves.

A quarrel zipped past. Abeke glanced back and saw Conor barge into the crossbowman as he reloaded. Briggan leaped from one target to another, snapping and clawing wildly at anyone foolish enough to get too near. Even Jhi was causing chaos, knocking a man to his knees with heavy swipes of her paws. Meilin had wrestled a sword from Brunhild the Merry and was doing what she'd spent years training to do, fighting extremely well. Rollan had gathered big pebbles and was hurling them with frightening accuracy. The big stones clanged off helmets and bashed a few noses. Sid yelled at his wolverine to attack, but the big beast hung back, snarling and clawing wildly as Essix swooped overhead, raking her talons across the beast's fur.

They were giving Abeke the chance to escape; she couldn't let them down.

Armored feet crunched the pebbles behind her as Song's warriors gave chase. But they wore heavy brass accessories and carried weapons, and Abeke was fleet-footed and unencumbered. Her heart pounded as she picked up the pace.

Behind her, the dragon roared again but she didn't pause to look. Her entire attention was on the route ahead. Abeke sprang onto a rock just as another quarrel clattered past. Then she jumped from one slab to another, leaving her pursuers farther and farther behind with each leap. Behind her, Oathbound goons slipped and fell, unable to haul themselves onto the rocks. So much of their armor

was for show, Abeke couldn't help but find it amusing that their vanity had let her escape.

One final leap took her clear of the beach and into the cave's mouth.

Without pausing to catch her breath, Abeke charged in.

"Uraza? Where are you?"

There was no sign of her leopard. Had Abeke gone into the wrong cave? Or was Uraza farther in?

Glancing back, Abeke caught a glimpse of the Oathbound. She couldn't risk going back out now. Hoping Uraza was indeed ahead, she delved into the cavern.

The cave floor was broken by rock pools and the walls dripped with water and seaweed. Deeper and deeper she went. The cries of the soldiers disappeared.

A soft growl greeted her from the shadows ahead. She saw a glimmer from a pair of bright violet eyes.

Abeke sighed. "There you are. I've been—"

Then she turned a corner and stopped.

A figure emerged from behind a rock. "Hello, Abeke."

Abeke blinked as she recognized the person standing before her. "You!"



OLD FRIENDS

“**A**T LEAST ABEKE GOT AWAY,” SAID ROLLAN. “GIVES US some more elbow room.”

Meilin glanced over at him. “Is that meant to be a joke?”

Rollan smirked. “Come on, admit it. You were starting to miss this cell. The damp walls, the cold breeze. The rats for company.”

Meilin shook her head but didn’t answer.

“We have got to escape,” said Conor. He was back at his usual spot by the door, searching as if there were some secret latch which, with a twist, would grant them freedom.

He needs to be busy.

Rollan put his hand protectively upon his mark. He had Essix back and right now that felt like a win. It didn’t change their situation, but it gave him some small hope.

Where had Abeke gotten to? After their friend escaped, Song had been furious. She ordered the Oathbound soldiers to scour the caves, but the whole area was riddled with them, dozens of tunnels that had been carved out by underground rivers. There had to be hundreds of miles to

search. Rollan felt hopeful that Abeke would keep ahead of the Oathbound.

But Song hadn't been angry for long. Not now that she had the Dragon's Eye ...

"Did you see the water dragon?" Meilin asked bleakly.

Conor snorted. "How could I miss him?"

When Song had ordered Seaspray back out of the water he had crawled, exhausted, to collapse in the shingles. But the lizard was now the size of an ox. Something about the ancient bond token had changed him. If Rollan was honest, the whole thing reminded him of the Bile and the way it transformed the animals who were forced to drink it.

As she watched her own spirit animal collapse, Song had stood over Seaspray, scowling in disgust. Then she'd summoned him into passive state—a newly enormous tattoo that stretched from her neck all the way to her ankle.

Meilin sighed, still gazing out the small grille. "I fear what she'll do with such power."

"Nothing good," Rollan concluded. "The girl's insane."

They fell silent as they heard armored footsteps approach. A heavy fist beat against the door. "Food!"

The hatch at the bottom of the door slid open and a tray was shoved through.

Rollan picked up one of the three bowls. "What's this?"

A face appeared at the small door grille. Wikam the Just sneered. "Food. You eat it. Or not. It makes no difference to me."

"It looks like seagull droppings."

"Is that not what you ordered?" Wikam frowned. "I must chastise the chef."

"Great. You think you're a comedian?"

Wikam tapped the bars. "What I am is on the *right* side of these. I can be whatever I want. Best eat up before it gets cold."

He was still laughing as he left and closed the door at the far end of the corridor.

Rollan sniffed the meal; his stomach twisted in revulsion. A few bones floated in the sludge. He didn't want to guess what animal they'd come from. Lumps of stale bread sat in the congealing mass. Rollan tested a lump. He swallowed it and had to close his eyes while trying not to gag.

When he opened them, he saw Conor had almost finished his bowl. "How can you eat that?"

"What? I'm hungry." Conor wiped the last of the goo off with his fingers, then licked them clean. "I'm not saying I like it, but food is food."

Meilin nibbled at hers, though her nose was wrinkled in disgust.

Rollan picked up a large piece of what might be meat and swallowed it whole, trying to get it down without touching any tastebuds on the way.

They ate in silence, each stuck in their own peculiar misery.

Rollan worked his way through his meal, reminding himself with every grueling bite that strength was all that mattered. He needed to keep his up, just in case a chance came along, as it had for Abeke.

But was that likely? The Oathbound would no doubt be watching them even more closely now.

Meilin finished her bowl then put her head in her hands. "That was the most disgusting thing I've ever eaten."

"If Song's still feeding us, she's got something planned," said Conor.

"Fattening us up for her dragon?" Rollan asked.

Conor waved to his empty bowl. "We're going to need more than this to get fat, Rollan."

The far door opened up again.

Rollan sighed. "Oh, good. Wikam's brought us dessert."

The footsteps paused outside the door. "Hey. Who's in there?"

The three of them sat up. That wasn't Wikam.

Rollan went to the door. "Who's asking?"

"Rollan?"

Keys rattled and then there was the click-clack of the lock opening.

The cell door creaked open. A lantern shone into the cell.
And upon the face of their rescuer.

"So, who wants to get out?" asked Worthy, grinning.



MEILIN RUSHED OUT AND HUGGED WORTHY. THE BOY was blushing when she stepped back, and she couldn't help but smile at his discomfort. "It's good to see you, Worthy."

"You too, Meilin."

Rollan and Conor greeted him with knocks and friendly slaps, but Meilin saw the stunned disbelief on their faces. They, like her, had never thought to see the young Redcloak ever again.

"What happened to Wikam?" asked Rollan, searching the narrow corridor.

Worthy gestured at the far door. "Abeke's taking care of him."

"Abeke?" Meilin exclaimed. "She's here?"

"Of course. How else did you think I'd find you so quickly? We, er, bumped into each other down in the caves." He started walking, tying on his pristine white cat mask as he moved. "But we can talk later. We need to get out."

The room beyond was Wikam's, and there they found Abeke, Wikam himself, and perhaps the hugest man Meilin

had ever seen. He wore the robes of a Niloan chief, and she couldn't miss the large rhino tattoo on his forearm. He smiled as they appeared, while the Oathbound squirmed, trapped as he was under the man's foot. Wikam was gagged and bound, with a fresh bruise swelling on the side of his head. Across the room, his vulture was similarly trussed.

Worthy bowed at the big man. "May I introduce Chief Ugo. He's the reason I'm here."

"So these are the young heroes I've been hearing so much about. The tales do not do you justice," said the chief.

Abeke shook the keys in front of her. "Help me put him in the cell. No one will come down till tomorrow."

"And we'll be long gone by then," said Worthy.

"Let me help," said Chief Ugo, easily picking up Wikam, who was not a slim man, with one hand through his belt. The Oathbound struggled and made noises, but the gag was thick and well-stuffed in his mouth.

They dropped him, not gently, into the cell, then tossed his vulture spirit animal in after him.

"Bye-bye," said Abeke, with a wave. Then she locked the door.

They gathered back in Wikam's quarters, where Ugo sat down on the stout wooden table. He folded his arms across his chest. "I'll keep this brief. I've had my suspicions regarding the death of the emperor from the moment I heard about it. I know the Oathbound are respected for protecting the leaders during the Devourer's war, but I've had my own dealings with them before, and I've seen the cruelties they impart when they think no one is watching. Though they've never tried anything quite so bold as killing an emperor." Chief Ugo shook his head. "The idea that it was a Greencloak plot was laughable—especially one orchestrated by Olvan and the Heroes of Erdas. So here I am. I came to find out what's going on. And, incidentally, to get you all out."

Worthy pointed to himself. "Which was my idea."

Meilin stepped forward and bowed. "Chief Ugo, the false Greencloaks who killed the emperor were Oathbound impostors acting on the orders of Empress Song. She wanted her father dead."

She watched the Niloan chief's face stiffen with shock. His black eyes narrowed. "Be careful, child. If what you say is true, we could be talking war."

"War?" Meilin gasped. "But we just ended the one against the Devourer."

"The other governments wouldn't stand for such a coup." The chief rubbed his chin. "But Abeke tells me that Song already has four powerful items of some kind, and that makes her doubly dangerous. Song knew that if her treachery was discovered she'd be challenged. That she did it anyway means something. She's confident she can defeat the other nations, not to mention the Greencloaks. These 'bond tokens' must be incredibly powerful for her to have risked so much."

"Another war would be disastrous for Erdas," Meilin muttered. "And especially for Zhong." Meilin had witnessed the loss of so much of her homeland already. To have it torn apart again was too much to bear. "There has to be another way."

Chief Ugo stood. "I must take you all back to Nilo. The High Chieftain will want to hear the full story from your own lips. Worthy has told me what he knows on the journey here, but your word will be vital if Song is to face true justice."

"How?" asked Conor.

"My ship is anchored a mile off the coast. Your red-cloaked friend also has a boat hidden in the caves along the bottom of the cliff. You will go with him and row out to the ship. My crew is expecting you."

"What about you?"

The chief frowned. "It will look too suspicious for me to depart the palace in the middle of the night. I'll follow at dawn, before anyone discovers what's happened down here. With a good wind behind us, we'll be swiftly out of reach from Song's navy."

"And off to start a war?" asked Meilin. "Is that what you want us to do?"

"I want you to tell the truth," said the chief. "I'm sorry, but some things are greater than the concerns of four children, even ones partnered with the Four Fallen."

Rollan stepped forward. "Song's greatest weapons are the bond tokens, right?"

"She's dangerous already, for who she is and what she's done, but yes, the fact that she controls such powerful artifacts only amplifies the peril we are all in."

"Then we can't leave without them. We steal them tonight."

Worthy sighed behind his mask. "I saw what was happening down at the beach. But does one big lizard really change anything? We need to get away."

"No," Meilin said. "Rollan's right. We need to stop Song."

Worthy shook his head. "Meilin ..."

If Meilin was being honest, she wanted to sail away. She knew the rest of them felt the same. It would be such a relief to get far away from here to somewhere safe.

But where was safe? Song and the Oathbound had grown powerful beyond belief. The Greencloaks were still imprisoned, and who knew what Song could truly do with the Dragon's Eye?

Another war was looming on the horizon. Meilin couldn't be a part of that.

Chaos lay ahead of them. More strife and misery for all Erdas.

She met the chief's gaze. "All the gifts are in one place, the Summer Palace. We need to get them back."

The chief sighed and shook his head. "I wish I had time to argue with you over this, but I suspect I wouldn't get very far. I must get back to the main palace, before any of Song's spies know I'm missing." He looked to Worthy. "We sail at dawn. Make sure you're back on board by then. With or without your friends."

And with that the Niloan chief left.

Conor grinned nervously at Meilin and clapped his hands. "So, you've got a plan?"

"No," she replied. "I haven't got a clue."



TO THE BOAT

“WE CAN’T LEAVE THESE PEOPLE HERE,” SAID ABEKE, looking at the corridor of cells. It hadn’t been immediately clear how many others were trapped in Song’s prison. For most of the Greencloaks’ stay, the corridor had been deathly silent. Now Abeke saw why. The prisoners were listless and emaciated. Their eyes were tired and sunken with hunger.

Wikam had been starving them.

“We need to get them out,” Abeke said.

Meilin nodded. “But how?”

All eyes turned to Worthy. “My boat’s big enough for about six, comfortably.”

Abeke did a rough head count. “Apart from us there are ten others. If we get down to the caves, we can hide them. Row the first batch out to Ugo’s ship, then do another journey for the second. It will take some time, but it’s the only way.”

Conor’s eyes darkened. “Then just leave?”

“What do you mean?”

“Song and the Oathbound have the four relics, Abeke. Even if we escape, they still have all the power.”

Abeke shook her head. "It gives us time to plan."

But it was a chance, wasn't it? Abeke looked at each of her friends, then she smiled at Rollan. "Getting at least one of the bond tokens back would weaken Song's power. And the Dragon's Eye seemed to be the most powerful."

Rollan clapped his hands. "Great. We grab the gemstone."

Conor grinned. "I'm in."

Meilin hesitated, but eventually nodded. "I visited the palace a few years ago with my father. I still remember the layout, more or less."

Abeke patted Worthy's shoulder. "You and me saving the prisoners?"

"That works." Worthy hefted the keys. "Let's get started."

They crept along the row of cells, working open the heavy locks. People slowly emerged, though they were more than a little wary of this miraculous rescue.

After a brief explanation from Abeke and the others, they learned that two of the prisoners were soldiers who'd been blamed for conspiring in the emperor's murder. They'd both been dedicated to Song's father and expressed suspicion about the attack.

"Song had the Oathbound lay false evidence against us, saying we were in league with the Greencloaks," muttered Chan. "I served her family for twenty years and this is where I end up."

"The fight's not over yet, brother," replied Li. "The Greencloaks will reveal the truth behind our emperor's death."

Chan merely grunted, glancing suspiciously at Meilin.

There were three nobles, also locked up for voicing doubts over Song's rule. And four of the prisoners were local merchants, robbed by the Oathbound and chained for complaining. Then, in the last cell ...

"Whee! Free! Free!"

Was the crazy old man.
He jumped out and hugged Abeke. "My savior!"
"Um, you're welcome." Abeke gently pushed him off.
"But will you please be quiet?"
The old man clamped his hand over his mouth.
Abeke rejoined the others, curled in a circle with Worthy as they discussed their plans. "Worthy and I will get them away, but then what?"
Rollan bit his lip. "Give the rest of us an hour. If we aren't back by then, go without us."
Abeke didn't like it, but Rollan was right. If at least she and Worthy could escape, then they'd be able to warn the other nations about Song. She smiled at him. "You'll make it."
"Robbing the Empress of Zhong of the most powerful relic in all Erdas? No problem." Rollan winked. "Though my thieving credentials aren't what they used to be."
"Grabbing the Eye isn't about thieving, it's about being heroic."
Rollan grinned. "That's what I told myself the day I summoned Essix. I was stealing medicine for a friend." Rollan's face went pale. "Come to think of it, I got caught that day."
Abeke wanted to swap places with one of her friends. Any of them. But she and Worthy had already navigated the caves, and time was pressing. She hugged the other three. "Don't be late."



It didn't take long for the plan to go wrong.

Things started out fine. She, Worthy, and the other prisoners left the prison level, with her at the front and Worthy at the back. They reached the courtyard without anyone seeing them, then crept along the rear of the stable

to the hay bales that were conveniently stacked up against the sea-facing outer wall.

Less convenient was the squad of Oathbound soldiers camped beside it.

"They weren't there when we came over," complained Worthy.

One of the soldiers, Li, smacked his fist into his palm. "We could rush them. Get a few of you over the wall while we keep them busy?"

Chan frowned. "That's Captain Peng. Not good. The man's cruel and dedicated to Song. He joined the Oathbound soon after the emperor's death."

Abeke drew back into the shadows of the stable roof. "There are almost twenty of them. All armed. We wouldn't stand a chance."

"Then we need another way out," said Worthy.

They needed help.

Someone stealthy, good at sniffing out secret paths at night, someone like ...

With a flash and tingle upon her arm, out stepped Uraza.

The leopard shook from her head to the tip of her tail, then nuzzled against Abeke. She turned around to watch the soldiers at the wall. Uraza growled softly.

"I'd prefer not to fight," said Abeke. "Too many of us are weak from imprisonment. We need to find another way out."

Uraza didn't think much of that. She revealed her claws, but Abeke met the cat's violet eyes unflinching. "Please, my friend."

Uraza gave a twitch of her long whiskers, then sniffed around. She then sprang fifteen feet in the air, up onto the stable roof, landing with barely a sound. She looked down at Abeke, and her tail twitched.

"Looks like we're going up," said Abeke.

Li patted his brother's shoulder. "Let me go first, then we'll help lift."

Chan braced himself against the wall, and Li used him as a ladder. The younger brother stepped into Chan's cupped hands, then quickly hopped to his shoulders before hauling himself up next to Uraza. He made it look easy.

Abeke grinned. "You've done this before."

"Sometimes we missed curfew," said Chan with a wink. "Sneaking back into the barracks is a time-honored tradition."

Worthy went up next, scaling the wall without Chan's help, thanks to his catlike abilities. Li looked a little put out, but the pair extended their hands downward. One by one, using Chan as a first step, the other prisoners were lifted onto the sloping roof, even the crazy old man.

Abeke patted Chan's shoulder. "You go now. I'll come up last."

Chan frowned as he judged the height of the wall. "That's quite a jump."

"I've learned a few tricks from Uraza."

Chan was heavier than he looked, but Abeke stayed steady as he climbed up on her shoulders and scaled the wall. He was no worse than Conor, really. Then she took a few steps back.

Li and Worthy dangled as low as they could, reaching down.

Abeke shook her head. "You've seen me jump, Worthy."

"This is a lot higher, Abeke. I'm not sure even you could

—

Three quick, springy steps, and Abeke bounced up.

She landed lightly on her feet at the top of the wall, completely ignoring the hands that had been offered her. "You were saying?"

"Keep low," grumped Worthy. "We're silhouetted against the sky."

Crouching low, Abeke made her way to the front of the line with Uraza. The big cat's eyes shone in the dark. She

waited, tail flicking with excitement. Then she headed off, constantly checking over her shoulder like a protective mother, making sure all her kittens were lined up behind her.

The roof creaked and a seagull squawked angrily when they stumbled near its nest. Abeke froze as voices rose from below, holding up her hand. A stable boy stirred in his sleep, Abeke could see him through a crack in the tile. The boy was nestled under a blanket on a pile of straw. One of the horses looked up at her mid-chew. Abeke put her finger to her lips. The horse just stared blankly, then returned to its meal of oats.

The edge of the stable roof came close to the outer wall.

"I can't jump that," complained one of the nobles. "We need to find another way."

"There isn't time," said Abeke. "And it's not *that* wide. Only five feet."

"I'm not doing it." The nobleman folded his arms. "It's a long drop."

"Don't think about the drop. Look, you could almost step over."

He glared at her. "Do you know who I am?"

"The man who's heading back to his cell if he doesn't do what I say."

"We must find another—yaah!"

The nobleman flew across, grabbing the side of the far wall as he landed.

Abeke stared at the crazy old man. "Did you just kick him in the backside?"

The old man lowered his foot guiltily. Then he took a step back and jumped over himself.

"Hey! What's going on up there! You! Come down!"

The nobleman's cry had alerted the Oathbound soldiers below. Now more were rushing toward them with spears.

"Jump!" Abeke shouted.

The rest of them leaped the gap as one of the soldiers hurled a spear. Abeke helped one of the prisoners over the side of the wall, then began looking for handholds.

The outer surface had been beaten by the elements for many years. Facing the sea, it had become pitted, cracked, and scratched. The once flat and seamless marble was now punctured by holes. The wall rested on a narrow cliff, but Abeke knew there was a path only a few yards farther. It led steeply down to Worthy's hidden boat.

They needed to move.

Abeke and the others shuffled like crabs down the outer wall. Once they reached the bottom, Worthy did a head count before running off along the path. "This way!"

Abeke heard shouts from the other side of the cliff. The gates were on the opposite end of the palace, so the Oathbound soldiers were climbing up onto the stable roof themselves.

They'd be upon them in only a minute.

"Not much of a head start," she muttered to Uraza. Then she turned to the rest of the prisoners. "Go! Follow Worthy!"

A quarrel zipped over her head. Uraza roared angrily.

Two soldiers lined the wall and were reloading their crossbows.

Time to leave.

Uraza sprang along the path. Abeke grabbed the old man. "Hurry up!"

The soldiers were climbing down the wall now. They moved slowly, encumbered as they were.

They were almost there!

The boat bobbed in the water, tied to a rock less than five yards from the cliff face. The tide had come in some; Worthy waded up to his chest before climbing in.

"Got you!"

A hand grabbed Abeke's collar.

She spun and kicked out simultaneously, catching the soldier on the side of his knee. He cried out as he stumbled, but didn't let go. Another soldier was a few feet behind him.

Uraza pounced. She flew overhead, slamming her forepaws into the man's armored collar. The Oathbound cried out as he fell, knocking his head into a hard rock. He groaned as Uraza turned her attention to the line of soldiers descending the slope after them.

Worthy had untied the boat, and everyone piled in except for Li and Chan. They bobbed alongside and were clearly going to swim. Worthy waved frantically at Abeke. "Come on!"

Abeke swiped out both arms, ripping herself free of the soldier's grip. "Uraza!"

The leopard was causing havoc. She clawed and bit and jumped and weaved between the clumsy stabs of the Oathbound. The path was too narrow for more than one at a time, but Uraza pounced from ledge to rock, ducking in and out of the battle. Men and women fell over themselves trying to escape her, and more than one soldier clutched desperately at the cliff face to avoid dropping into the water in their armor.

"Come on, Abeke!" yelled Worthy. "Jump!"

The rowboat was already heading away. The other prisoners were also shouting for her to jump.

"Uraza! We're leaving!" shouted Abeke. Then she took a deep breath and ...

A sharp blow connected with Abeke's back, spilling the air from her lungs and sending her over the cliff. She hit the water hard. It was black and cold, and she sank straight down. She heard a dull splash somewhere to her right, then she attacked the water, beating it with her hands and feet to claw back to the surface.

Panic threatened to consume her.

An Oathbound soldier appeared beside her in the water. Abeke recognized the man Chan and Lin had called Captain Peng. His eyes were wild as he seized Abeke, wrapping his fingers around her wrist.

Abeke floundered. The soldier was pulling her lower!

Her cheeks swelled as what was left of her air bubbled out. The weight of the Oathbound drew her farther and farther below. It was black wherever she looked.

Then a second hand locked itself around Abeke's other wrist. It pulled her upward with shocking strength.

With this new hand guiding her, Abeke could kick more confidently. She knocked Captain Peng in the head with her foot. The Oathbound's grip loosened, then his weight disappeared completely. Abeke lost sight of Peng almost immediately. His pale hand was swallowed by the darkness.

Abeke concentrated on the pull of the other hand. After an agonizing few seconds, they broke the surface together.

"Worthy?" she gasped, after several long moments of grateful breathing. A wave crashed over her and she was almost pulled into the water again, but the strong hand dragged her up the ledge, beneath an overhanging rock.

Uraza appeared by her side, gently tugging her shirt. Abeke collapsed, relieved to have fresh air back in her lungs.

Blinking the water from her eyes, she saw Worthy's boat far in the distance. They were way out now and weren't coming back. Spears fell short as each stroke of the boat's oars took it farther away.

Abeke sat up. If *that* was Worthy, then who ... ?

The crazy old man squatted beside her. He grinned. "Splishy, splashy. Abeke's no fish!"

Abeke hugged him, and he responded with a short yelp of surprise.

"No, I'm not," she agreed.



SONG'S QUARTERS

“THE PALACE IS A LOT BIGGER THAN I THOUGHT,” SAID Conor. Meilin nudged him along. “Take this left.”

He did as she told, but Conor felt they’d been down this corridor already. Despite Meilin’s protestations, they were very lost.

They carried on, keeping to the shadows, ducking into doorways and behind columns when they heard footsteps.

A gloomy ambience hung over the palace. The servants talked in hushed, wary tones and no one lingered.

Meilin frowned. “If it’s like this now, imagine what it’s going to be like after Song’s been in charge a year. Or a decade.”

“Where do you think she’s keeping the Dragon’s Eye?” asked Rollan.

Conor had wondered the same thing. “She’ll want it near her, that’s for sure. You saw the way the Oathbound are with the other bond tokens. Cordelia couldn’t stop fidgeting with hers.”

“Song’s personal chambers are that way,” said Meilin. “We could—quick!”

They ducked behind a doorway as armored footsteps clanged on the marble floor.

Conor's ears twitched. He recognized the voices speaking.

"I'm worried about Song," said Kana. "The stress is getting to her."

"Oh, you noticed that too?" replied Sid. "Ranting about her dead father. She's losing her mind."

"Careful, Sid. She's my oldest, best friend."

There was a chuckle from Kana's companion. "But you know I'm right?"

"I can handle Song, but it's Cordelia I want to discuss," said Kana. "You've seen what she's like with the Wildcat's Claw. I don't trust her."

"No one trusts her," laughed Sid. "But what do you want done about her?"

"What do you think?"

There was a pause, then Sid replied more thoughtfully. "It won't be easy, but we could do it."

"Then sort it out. There are others who could use the Wildcat's Claw. Brunhild isn't likely to go on any rampages. Cordelia's been useful, but now she's a liability. We need to..."

The rest was lost as they disappeared around the next corridor.

Conor shook his head. "I almost feel sorry for Cordelia. Almost."

But not surprised. Once in a while a rabid dog would wander into Trunswick. A pet might get infected, go savage, and attack anyone who crossed its path. There was only one sad way to take care of such animals.

Had the Wildcat's Claw made things worse for Cordelia? It was a bond token, so who really knew what it was capable of?

Maybe these gifts were more dangerous than they'd even realized.

If he was honest, Conor would prefer to have nothing to do with them. Tembo, the first Greencloak, had hidden the gifts for a reason, and this was it. The tokens were dangerous in the wrong hands.

"This way," said Meilin.

This part of the palace wasn't as grand as the entrance hall. They passed by a small kitchen area, and Conor salivated at the sweet flavors drifting through the partially opened doorway. There was laughter coming from the servants' quarters as they relaxed out of sight from their masters. Conor felt a pang of kinship. When the master was rotten, it was always the servants who suffered most.

They hurried up a flight of stairs, into what were the sleeping quarters. Lamps hung from the ceiling. Most were now extinguished or sizzling softly on low wicks.

Meilin stopped at a corner and put a finger to her lips. Creeping up next to her, Conor peeked around.

Two guards stood before a pair of bronze-clad doors. Strangely, these two weren't in the usual Oathbound garb.

"Those don't look like Kana's men," he whispered. "But they do look like they can handle themselves."

Meilin nodded. "They *would* be the last of the old guard that she kept around. Father told me the emperor's bodyguards are the deadliest warriors in the world. They've mastered six forms of unarmed combat and all are experts in sword, spear, bow, and halberd."

Rollan tapped his head. "But nothing up here, right?"

"Wrong. Each has memorized the philosophy of Tang in its entirety—in the original ancient Zhongese. Six volumes, excluding appendices."

"So they're good," said Rollan. "But they're not Greencloaks."

"Each has perfect command over his body. They can stand without moving for twelve hours."

"Shh, one's coming." Conor pulled Meilin and Rollan behind a large vase.

One of the two guards rushed past. He looked uncomfortable, and moved in haste.

Conor raised his eyebrow. "Perfect command of everything but his bladder apparently."

"But there's still—"

Briggan sprang from his tattoo and bounded down the corridor. His claws clattered on the marble as he leaped at the guard.

There was a sharp cry, a thump, and then it was all over.

They ran down the corridor and there was Briggan, standing over the guard, his bared teeth an inch from the man's throat. He let out a menacing growl. A very menacing growl.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," suggested Conor. "Briggan's always hungry when he comes out of passive state. And grouchy when he's not outdoors."

"Br—Briggan?" The guard's eyes widened. "The Great Beast Briggan?"

Conor scratched the wolf's furry neck. "The one and only."

Rollan put his palm on the door handle. "You ready?"

The guard spluttered. "You can't go in there!"

Briggan snarled and licked the man's neck, brushing his teeth along the bare skin.

The guard shut up.

They needed to be quick before the other one returned. Quietly and slowly, Rollan opened the door to Empress Song's private quarters.

Even though it was dark, it took Conor only a few moments to realize the room was empty. He went in, Meilin and Rollan right behind him. There were another two rooms leading off this one. Conor looked in one, while Rollan checked the other. Meilin stayed behind to search the antechamber.

Conor entered Song's bedroom. The large bed was empty of linens, the blankets tossed on the floor.

A full-height window led out into the open air. Its curtains billowed in the rising wind. Conor spotted something lying at the threshold: an ornate wooden box with silk padding.

Perfect in size for the Dragon's Eye.

He joined the others and handed the box to Rollan.
"We're too late. She's gone off with it."

Meilin wasn't listening. She read through a set of scrolls abandoned on the table. "This is bad. Song's written out all these instructions to her generals. She's planning war."

"Not exactly surprising," said Conor.

Meilin waved to one of the scrolls. "If the other rulers knew about this ..."

Conor glanced at the open window in Song's room.

Was that a trick of the light, or was someone moving through the foliage beyond?

He gestured the others to be silent, then crept back in place, hiding himself to the side of the window.

Was it Song creeping back from wherever she'd gone? A secret spy who guarded the room from the trees?

A shadow stretched across the floor.

It was a girl, that much he could tell.

She stepped in, and Conor grabbed her.

"Hey!"

He blocked the fist the girl threw at his face, then sent her spinning across the room. She crashed against the bed in a tangle of sheets.

Conor leaped forward. "Don't move."

The girl pulled bedding off her and looked up at him. "Is that how you treat your friends?"

Then Abeke got to her feet and laughed.



SONG'S DESCENT

FAITHER! YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM ME!" SONG RAN ALONG the garden path. Where was he?

"Father ..."

What did he want from her?

She'd been asleep, but heard him tapping at the window. The guard had come in and explained it was just the branch against the glass, but Song had *seen* him.

A shadow watched from the other side. As soon as the guard left, he started again, tapping and tapping.

Song had thrown open the window, but he wasn't there.

But was there someone out in the garden? She thought she'd seen a figure moving behind the trees.

Putting the Dragon's Eye in her pocket, Song had climbed over the low balcony and run barefoot after the apparition.

She held up the glowing emerald. "Look! I have it! I have done what you could never do!"

But all she heard was a pitying cry in the rising wind.

"I am greater than you could ever hope to be!" She cried out at the shadows around her. One of them *had* to be the old emperor.

Song winced. Suddenly the Dragon's Eye seemed so heavy. It weighed down her hand. She stared at it; the weird shifting light from within felt as if it was piercing her eyes.

"I will control you," she told the token. "You will make me ruler."

The wind had picked up and the trees rocked side to side, adding their groaning to her own voice.

"Song!"

Kana ran through the bushes, with her two Oathbound allies Sid and Cordelia close behind her.

Song trembled. Why were they here?

Had they come to kill her?

That was it! They wanted the Dragon's Eye for themselves!

"Get away from me!" Song turned and ran.

She had trusted Kana, trusted her to infiltrate the Greencloaks and arrange the murder of her father.

Song stumbled through the bushes. Thorns pulled at her clothes and stabbed into her soles, but she clutched the Eye tightly against her chest. They would *not* get it.

"Song! Wait!"

"Get away from me! You can't have it!"

They were coming in from either side, Cordelia from the left, Sid from the right. She had nowhere to run.

Kana grabbed her as she reached the cliff's edge.

"Stop running! You'll fall!"

Song slowly stopped her struggling. "You don't want the Eye?"

"No!" Kana said, her eyes worried. "You are the Empress of Zhong. It's rightly yours."

Song slumped. "I ... I don't know what's happening to me, Kana."

It began to rain—soft, tiny drops. Judging by the darkness of the clouds, however, this was a mere prelude.

Perhaps a storm was coming.

Kana began leading her gently back to the palace. "We should get you inside, where it's safe."

"It's not safe anywhere, Kana. He's after me."

"Who?"

Song bit her lip. Her heart raced as she spoke. "My father."

"He's dead," said Kana plainly. "He can't hurt you anymore."

"He's *out there*," Song insisted. "Watching me, judging me. He was a cruel man and a useless father. He ... he had to go. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course," said Kana. "We did what we had to do, Song. But that's the past now." Kana tightened her hold on Song's arm. "Please, let's go inside."

"No," said Song. She felt better now. Stronger. Something in the rain had set her right. "I need to show my father what I can do."



Song had to tap into the full power of the Dragon's Eye. Awaken its potential, rather than just experiment with it as she'd done earlier.

Kana and her two companions waited at the foot of the cliffs, while Song stood knee-deep in the waves. The wind threw a cold spray at her, but she ignored it.

The Eye shone brighter now that she was in the sea. It pulsed, and powerful waves of energy traveled through her, firing her blood and bringing an electric tingle to her skin.

Her water dragon was out there, swimming offshore. She watched him ripple through the dark water.

Seaspray was big, but Song knew if she could harness the power of the Eye, she could make the dragon even greater.

She remembered the look of disappointment on her father's face when she'd summoned Seaspray. She'd been so proud of having a spirit animal. Song could still remember how her heart had swelled with joy, seeing the small lizard swimming through the water toward her, then climbing up this very pebble beach.

The moment they first touched had been ... everything.

She'd turned around, hopeful, expecting to see the same joy in her father. But the moment their eyes had met, she was stunned by his cold gaze.

"It's small," her father had said. He frowned. "Call it into passive state."

"He's a boy lizard," Song had called back.

The emperor's eyes narrowed. "Call. It. To. You."

Song turned, nodding to her new spirit animal. "Come on, Seaspray. Go into passive form. We're partners now!"

The tiny water dragon just curled into a ball and fell asleep.

Song remembered the Greencloak who'd administered her Nectar trying to argue on her behalf.

"Bonds take time," he'd implored, his lovely white crane standing in the sand beside him. "Perhaps the princess could join me in Greenhaven for a while, to foster hers?"

Her father had ordered the guards to escort the Greencloak away.

Song was humiliated. Her father made no attempt to hide his disgust, and that made it even worse. He didn't even stay to chastise her; instead he'd swept away and marched straight back to the palace. His ministers hurried after him.

Neither he, nor half the nobles, bothered attending the evening feast to celebrate her Nectar Ceremony.

Kana had been there, watching from the side, like a dutiful servant. As the room cleared she had dared to approach the table, sitting beside Song and helping her finish the lavish cake.

They'd been closer than sisters from that point on.

"Nothing I ever did was good enough for you, Father." Song gazed out at the sea. "But what did you ever do? Nothing. You were content to just sit on your little throne. No ambition at all. An emperor should have ambition. Otherwise what's the point?"

She took another step deeper into the sea, then another. The waves rocked her, but she'd grown up swimming here. She knew its currents. The only freedom Song could remember was when she'd swam, Seaspray playfully darting from this side to that. The dragon had been her companion, her friend.

And her failure.

She was up to her neck now. The water was cold, but Song didn't feel it. The Eye, now slipped over her neck, pulsed harder. It illuminated the pebbles in the water. A few small fish came close, to investigate the source of this strange green light.

Song took a deep breath and swam.



Down and down she swam, each stroke drawing her deeper under the water into that strange, mute world of shifting light and current.

She could see clearly, and her lungs held the air with little strain.

I could stay down here forever.

The Dragon's Eye gave her these underwater gifts. She understood that it would allow her to be with her water dragon, above and below.

She was alone, and free. Song had forgotten what it felt like to escape the palace and all its people. The servants, the soldiers, and the Oathbound.

How deep was she now? She could hardly see the sky, but did catch glimpses of distant lightning.

The Dragon's Eye glowed upon her chest; Song paused to look around.

What a world.

Coral hills spread out in all directions, tinted in wonderful colors. Red and orange, green and blue. Silver-scaled fish darted past. An immense stingray glided over her, and Song reached up and brushed her fingers against it.

The water surged around her. Scales glistened and a pair of bright yellow eyes shone out of the darkness. With a beat of its wings, the stingray fled.

Her water dragon swam around her, and Song gazed in wonder. He was easily twenty feet long now.

Seaspray drew closer, then floated before her.

You and I will rule the world.

She saw the misshapen spine, the deformed legs, and the crooked tail. The changes had been uneven.

She sensed Seaspray's pain, but there was nothing she could do but continue. Didn't he understand how important this was? He'd always been useless; the Dragon's Eye would make him great, at last.

It'll make him a monster.

It'll make him feared.

An empress should be feared.

Song tugged off the Eye and held it before her. The gem began to brighten....



THE WOLF

GETTING OUT OF THE PALACE WAS HARDER THAN CONOR had expected. The place was in lockdown, now that the prison escape had been discovered.

Conor and Abeke led the way, but they couldn't get past the guards. Instead they used the tree to climb down and ducked into a nearby doorway. The team was back underground, in the armory.

Rollan scowled as he looked around the dingy room. "We might as well just lock ourselves back in the cells, for all the progress we're making."

Conor nodded. "It would be the last place they'd look."

Meilin inspected one of the swords and gave it a casual swing. "We could fight our way out?"

Rollan picked up a short sword and tried to mimic Meilin's skillful strokes. He gave up. "Not sure how far I'd get."

But weapons weren't the only items down here. Conor spotted a pile of gear by the door. It looked familiar ...

He picked up the first item, a cloak. "Hey, this is Tarik's."

Rollan snatched it off him. His eyes widened. "It is! I thought I'd lost it."

The Oathbound had confiscated their gear after they'd been captured. Conor picked up his old ax and set it in his belt. Then his eye caught a familiar shape, leaning against the wall. It was a shepherd's crook, in the Eurian style. Conor wondered how such an item had found its way into Song's armory. It had made quite a journey ... just like Conor himself. He ran his hands over the smooth, old wood.

Abeke checked her bow, adjusting the bowstring and giving it a testing draw. She then collected a quiver of arrows and slung them over her shoulder. "If it's going to be a fight, I'm ready."

Conor pointed over to the corner. "What about him?"

Abeke had gotten all the prisoners away, everyone but the crazy old man. He was by the axes, trying and failing to lift a double-headed monstrosity.

"He's our secret weapon," said Abeke. "The guards will be laughing so hard we'll just walk out."

Meilin strapped on a sword belt and picked out a falchion. It slid soundlessly into its scabbard. "That doesn't solve our biggest problem: the impending war."

"It might not happen," said Conor, but even he knew it was a weak excuse.

Meilin sighed. "We need to get to that boat before the sun comes up. To warn the other nations."

"We *need* to get the bond tokens back," Conor said. "I've just got this feeling that if we leave Song with the Dragon's Eye, something terrible is going to happen."

Rollan frowned. "I've learned by now to trust your feelings," he said. "But how? We're outnumbered, and the Oathbound have all four tokens. As much as I respect Abeke's archery skills, there's no way we'd survive a fight on those terms."

"We could make our own bond tokens," Meilin said softly. She took out the scroll case that Xin Kao Dai had revealed to her.

The group was silent for a long moment.

"We don't even know if it would work," said Rollan.

"So what's new?" said Conor.

"What's new is the danger!" Rollan replied. "Think about what we've learned so far. The bond tokens are created from *our* spirit animal bonds. If those bonds aren't strong enough, they're broken. Forever! And even if we do succeed, a token that's destroyed while its creators are still alive *kills* them both."

"We can't take on Song and the Oathbound as we are," said Conor. "We'll die that way, too."

"But if we get this wrong," Meilin said in a small voice, "it could tear our bonds apart." Her hand holding the scroll was trembling. "For us, *and* for our spirit animals. Are you sure we have the right to ask this of them?"

Even this far underground, with yards of rock protecting them in all directions, Conor heard the pounding of the waves beyond.

His friends were right. It was a huge risk. But if they didn't ... ?

"Do you remember my dream about the great wave?" Conor said. "The one that wipes out everything it touches? I think that wave is Song. The Dragon's Eye is dangerous in her hands. If we leave without it, Erdas won't survive. If we fight without the power to match the Oathbound, then Erdas still won't survive."

Rollan looked uncomfortable. He'd just saved Essix, and now they were talking about putting her in even more danger. But he nodded. "Fine. But I only promise to *ask* her. Essix makes her own decisions."

Abeke frowned. "Perhaps we can try this ... bonding whatever later, when we're away from here."

"We can't," said Conor, wishing it could be otherwise. "It's got to be now or never."

Conor looked around at the others. No one looked happy with this plan, but one by one they all nodded. They all knew it was the best chance they had of stopping Song. He met Meilin's gaze. "All right. What's the process?"

They gathered around her as she opened the tube and took out the scroll.

The paper was old and delicate. Meilin unrolled it carefully. It cracked under the gentle effort, but held.

"What do you think?" Conor asked.

Meilin's brow furrowed as she concentrated on the minute text. "The ink has faded over the centuries, but I can just about read it. It's a very ancient style." She glanced to Rollan. "Good thing I had tutors for that."

Rollan grinned. "Beat me to it."

"It's more like poetry than straight instruction. There are a lot of weird double meanings. Triple meanings, too." She pointed to a small pattern. "This could mean 'a waking dream' or it could mean 'buying three eggs.'"

Abeke peered over her shoulder. "Please tell me you're joking?"

"Zhongese logograms can have multiple meanings, and the older forms even more so. Plus the symbols have evolved over the years. They may not represent the same things they did, back when this was first written."

"That does not fill me with hope, Meilin," said Abeke.

"No one said it would be easy. The scroll is full of warnings of the dangers of getting the process wrong, rather than helping get it right."

Meilin went pale. "Oh."

Conor didn't like the sound of that. "What?"

"It's ... just a description of what would happen if there was an imbalance between the bonded beings."

Sailing off to find Worthy suddenly felt like a good idea.

"Well?" asked Rollan.

Meilin grimaced. "It says here that if you don't open your mind, it will be crushed under the pressure of the process, leaving you a drooling idiot."

"Oh."

"And this section explains that if you hesitate at the zenith of the exchange, the incorrect transfer of power will leave you a gibbering idiot."

Rollan pointed at a row written in faded red ink. "And that?"

"Oh, that's just describing how your brains will pour out of your nose."

Rollan gulped loudly.

Meilin finished reading the scroll. "There's not much to it." She looked inside the tube, searching for an extra sheet. "Hmm."

Conor stared at her. "Hmm? Don't give us *hmm!* Tell us!"

Meilin put her finger in and drew out some mulch. "This *hmm*. Water must have gotten in at some point and destroyed the bottom of the scroll. It's incomplete."

Conor groaned. "But can you tell how much?"

"Judging by the small amount of paper, only a few lines. If they'd been more warnings, then it doesn't matter. But if they're guidance on how to form the bond, we could be in deep trouble."

"I call gibbering idiot," said Rollan. "Drool grosses me out."

Meilin took a deep breath. "We'll each need a token. Something representational."

Conor held out the shepherd's crook.

"Don't you want something more ... useful?" asked Meilin. "Like your ax—"

"No. This is me." Conor tapped it on the stone floor. "It can't be anything else."

Rollan swung Tarik's cloak over his shoulders. "And this is mine."

Abeke merely plucked her bowstring.

"What about you, Meilin?" Conor asked. "The sword? It suits you."

Meilin drew it. "It doesn't feel right," she said with a sigh. "The tokens should represent both us *and* our animals, and Jhi isn't a warrior at heart."

"What, then?"

Meilin looked down at the scroll. Her hair fell over her face and she pulled it aside, automatically turning it around her finger into a rope. Then she looked thoughtful. She picked up a hairpin she'd found in her belongings.

Meilin held it out. "My father gave this to me, on some birthday or another." She drew her nail over the design. "These are the symbols of knowledge and strength. My father didn't believe in things like luck or hope. He believed in studying and applying one's self. Taking what you knew and going out there and using it, to help the nation, the community, your friends."

Conor smiled. "Sounds like a bond token to me."

She gripped it and nodded. "Let's summon our friends."

Essix shrieked as she broke free of the tattoo. She spread out her gray and golden wings, shifting from one foot to the other and settling down on the top of the open door. Her brilliant, bright eyes reflected the amber light of the torches, as if shining with a fire of their own.

The deep growl from Uraza made the hairs on the back of Conor's neck stand on end. The leopard sniffed warily, unused to the cramped underground quarters. But she settled as Abeke put her arm over her neck. The cat rested her head on the girl's lap and purred.

Conor's own partner, Briggan, yawned as he awoke from Conor's mark. He ran his red tongue over his black lips, then went to the table and snatched the jailer's leg of beef.

He sat down beside Conor and started gnawing. “Your turn, Meilin.”

“I … I don’t know. This might be a mistake. For me.”

“Why?”

“The scroll assumed the process of creating a bond token would be carried out with true spirit animals. I used … Bile, remember? Will Jhi trust me fully?”

Conor took Meilin’s hand. He felt it shaking and he steadied it. “That was then, Meilin. Call Jhi.”

Meilin closed her eyes. A moment later, she juddered and when she looked again, there stood Jhi. The panda’s fur rippled as it ambled beside her.

Jhi pushed her cheek against Meilin’s, and Meilin pushed her fingers through the thick fur, obviously thankful for the bear’s gentle strength.

“Jhi, I need your help,” Meilin said. She glanced around to the other Four Fallen. “We all do. If we’re going to defeat Song and her Oathbound, then we have to be a match for them.”

“We need bond tokens,” Abeke said, running her hands through Uraza’s fur. “Just like the ancient heroes. But the process …”

“You *know* how dangerous the process is,” Rollan muttered. He glanced up at Essix on the doorframe. “Because you’ve done it already. Your talismans were tokens, weren’t they? Different, but the same. Gransfen told us.”

“What we’re asking you is to trust us with something just as precious,” Conor said. He pulled his hand from Briggan’s coat, suddenly hesitant to touch him. “Something just as dangerous.”

The Four Fallen glanced between each other. Briggan, Uraza, Jhi, and Essix. It was a strange sort of communion—wordless—but Conor had little doubt that they *were*

communicating somehow. Even as spirit animals, the Great Beasts were still connected.

Then Briggan licked his face. The wolf hopped eagerly to his feet, panting. Essix shrieked from the door, and Uraza purred beside Abeke. Jhi glanced toward Meilin, her silver eyes resolute.

“Looks like we’re ready,” said Meilin.

Conor tightened his grip around the shepherd’s crook. The wood was smooth and dark; someone had carried it for a long, long time.

Who? Had it been a boy like him, once upon a time? Tending sheep day in, day out. Looking after them as the seasons came and went. Had the boy grown up, become a man, an elder? Had he taken this crook out before dawn, as one year melded into the next?

That might have been Conor’s life, too, if it hadn’t been for Briggan.

All those days with nothing more to worry about than counting the sheep out in the morning, and counting the same number back in the evening.

For better or for worse, he wasn’t going to have that sort of life.

It still held an appeal. The simplicity of it. But if he’d gone down that path, then Conor would have never met Abeke, Rollan, and Meilin. His life would have been limited to a few fields, a patch of grass on a slope. The same view for every day of his life.

His life before Briggan seemed to belong to another Conor.

He remembered the morning of the Nectar Ceremony, all that time ago, when he’d been the servant of Devin, the young noble of Trunswick. It seemed ridiculous now that his ambition had been to have a sheepdog as a spirit animal.

What if he *had* summoned one? Big and fluffy, with a calm temperament and a quick mind.

How would his life have turned out?

Well, certainly not hiding in the Summer Palace of the Empress of Zhong, that's for sure.

Now he was attempting something far deeper than just a spirit animal bond.

Briggan growled, a few feet from him. Conor gazed into those blue eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

Meilin read down the scroll. "It says to close your eyes and see the animal in your mind and heart."

"How do you do that?"

"Sorry. It doesn't really explain. There's something about *being* the animal. Whatever that means."

Conor scowled. "Should I run around on all fours and bark a bit?"

Rollan laughed. "No harm in trying."

Conor sat back on his heels and closed his eyes. He concentrated on their bond.

He smelled Briggan's damp fur. The wolf's pelt had a unique odor. It changed with the seasons and the location. Here on the coast, Briggan absorbed the wild sea and the salty air, catching particles within his long hairs.

Conor's skin prickled. His own hair stood on end. He felt the breeze upon him, ever so slightly to begin with, but growing as his sensitivity increased. Minute currents slipped through his fingers, cold shifts that rippled over his bare face.

Was this what it was like, being a wolf?

His breath deepened and slowed. Conor saw Briggan in the center of his mind.

The large wolf stood in long grass. The trees were thick all around, and the sunlight formed a dappled pattern across his gray shoulders as it fell through the lattice of

leaves. Birds called from the branches, and there was the distant laughter of water running over rocks.

It was warm here in this forest. Not the true warmth of summer, but the temptation of it. It was a springtime warmth, so he felt the sun, but also the cold dark, as if the shadows had trapped the last of the winter's chill.

Deeper he breathed. The forest became more than a feeling, a figment of his imagination.

It became ...

He became ...

He sniffs the grass, seeking out a scent of something to chase. Something to hunt. Something to eat.

His stomach is tight, but he has learned to live with hunger. How long since his last meal, that rabbit he snatched in his jaws as it fled to its hole?

He doesn't count the passing of time the same way as his human partner does.

Paws dig at the soft earth, moist from the morning dew. He pauses to lick water from the tip of a low leaf.

The brambles brush against him as he glides through.

His ears twitch as he hears movement. A hoof catches lightly on a rock and there is the fearful breath of a creature that smells him, just as he smells it.

A heart trembles, not far away.

He lowers himself into the grass and waits.

His thigh muscles quiver in anticipation. He forces himself to be still, not easy when the scent of prey floods his nostrils.

His fur ripples with the change in the wind. His prey approaches, ignorant and unaware.

He has fangs. He has claws and speed and the muscles of a true predator. There is nothing extra in him that might cause him to falter, unlike sweet Conor.

The boy doubts. The boy worries. The boy looks to his friends and looks back at himself, unsure of what he is.

A wolf has no doubts about what he is.

He is wildness incarnate, though he walks in the steps of his human partner. He was born when the world was new, before the beasts understood that there were those that hunted and those that fled. He taught them such things. He may not have been as powerful as the lion or as stealthy as the leopard. He did not have the grace of the eagle or the swiftness of the falcon, yet there was not a beast in all Erdas who more possessed the spirit of the hunter as he.

His human partner doubted, but he did not. He knew what he was.

Briggan.

The deer stepped into view.

Conor snapped his eyes open. "Oh ... wow."

The others stared at him. "What happened?" Abeke asked.

What indeed? Conor held out his hands, half expecting to see claws. He touched his face. A normal nose, rather than a snout. His teeth were as before, not long fangs. He didn't appear to have grown a tail.

He was human, still.

But his heart pumped with such strength he could barely hold it in. His muscles burned with feverish desire. And his head swam with a spinning kaleidoscope of scents.

He'd never understood what pure joy could really be until he'd stepped in Briggan's skin. The wolf had pounced and taken the deer with a single bite. Conor licked his lips, still savoring the sweetness of the perfect kill.

Briggan's emotions, his desires, his needs, were simple and unencumbered. He knew what he needed, and that was that. He was a wolf.

Conor felt himself rise.

Things fell away from him. His worries about the past, mistakes he'd made, things he wished he'd done or said better.

Briggan didn't worry about these things.

And what did tomorrow mean? There would always be another tomorrow. Briggan did not care for tomorrow. A wolf had today and savored every second of it.

Conor held the crook tightly, still feeling the electric thrill of what he'd tasted.

His gaze fell on Rollan. Conor grinned. "Your turn."



THE FALCON

ESSIX SETTLED ON ROLLAN'S SHOULDER. HER TALONS dug in through the material, squeezing, but not quite piercing, the flesh beneath.

He brushed down the feathers covering her chest. Essix churred in approval.

It seemed to him that they'd been together forever. He could hardly remember his life before she'd entered it.

And what an inauspicious entrance! Deep in a cell in Concorba. He'd been caught trying to rob an apothecary of willow extract for a sick friend. Digger, that had been the boy's name. Another street urchin, just like Rollan.

So much that followed had been wild, exciting, bewildering. He'd grown up in a semi-derelict orphanage until he'd run off at nine, tired of the foul food and endless, backbreaking work.

Then it had been the dark alleyways and crowded streets of Concorba. Rifling through the bins at the end of the day for leftovers. Sleeping in doorways or in hastily erected shelters that dripped during the wet days and overheated on the sunny ones. Their homes would last only as long as it took the militia to find and tear them down.

Those streets had been his whole world. Now the whole world was his whole world.

Essix sensed his mood and spread out her wings. She shook them, as if ready for flight.

"One day, Essix," he promised. "We'll travel the world together *without* a crisis. We'll go everywhere."

"Rollan?"

He turned his attention to Meilin. The girl gestured to a spot on the floor beside her. "Maybe if you sit down?"

He did. Essix hopped off and, with a merest flick of her wingtips, rose to perch on an armrest facing Rollan.

He settled down and looked into Essix's eyes as deeply as he could. He matched his breathing to the rise and fall of the bird's chest. It felt awkward at first, but the pattern established itself, so he knew they would stay in time as he closed his eyes.

With his lids shut Rollan expanded his other senses.

He felt the air move around him.

Even here underground there were currents.

They ruffled Rollan's hair. They caressed his cheeks, the bare skin of his arms. They were subtle, slight, yet grew stronger every passing second. How was that possible?

Rollan's heartbeat quickened, half in fear, half in excitement.

He could no longer feel the floor underneath him. The air surrounded him, drifting, rushing, and roaring all around.

Rollan panicked. He was losing control. Suddenly he was tumbling.

But he was in an underground cell!

No! He was high in the sky!

The wind rushed past him, and he knew if he didn't do something he would be crushed when he hit the ground.

But what could he do? He didn't have wings!

Over and over, Rollan fell. He cried out, but those cries were ripped away by the wind.

Then his cry transformed. He called out, but it was with the shriek of the falcon.

Joyous, free, wind riding.

He stopped spinning. He flattened his body against the rushing air and instead of fighting it, became a part of it. He spread out his wings so the cold air rushed through his feathers.

He turned and swooped. The air to one side became more intense, more resistant, as he pushed in that direction. With a flick of his feathers, he turned the other way. He skimmed across the treetops, his shadow a blur across the undulating ground.

Rollan rose up. Up and up he went, the sun warming his wings, blessing him with its glow as he passed above the clouds and—

Erdas. He gazed down upon it. The seas glistening in the daylight. Green expanses spread out before him, dappled in the tawny shades that marked Amaya. Farther west—for the falcon's sight seemed to have no limits—the horizon bent away into dusky darkness. Rollan could see the outline of faraway Stetriol and the long shadows of the Hundred Isles, all asleep.

What a world it was. Rollan's heart filled almost to bursting. What visions came from being up high. There were no boundaries. He spread out his feathers, as if he might touch one end of the world and the other. He might even cup it in his palms.

But the clouds darkened. They stirred with malevolent anger. They rumbled, angry voices that protested his presence. They crackled with lightning.

Rollan knew he needed to leave, fast.

And there are few things faster than a falcon. He dove through the rain-swollen clouds, breaking free of their cold embrace to soar above the sea, above the land and above

the Summer Palace. He spun between its tall towers and then ...

Opened his eyes.

Essix sat opposite, still on her perch, but her gaze intense upon his. She fluttered her wings, the way she did after a long flight.

Rollan drew a long, deep breath. His heart calmed, and he noticed the sweat dripping from his nose. His skin burned, yet he could still feel the rain and cold winds.

Meilin arched an eyebrow. "Well?"

Rollan wiped his forehead. "That. Was. Amazing."

"How? Tell us."

He looked at his arms, half expecting them to be covered in feathers. "I flew. Really flew. Not like a dream or a wish, but like a bird flies. Riding the wind, seeing the world from up high." He laughed. "I still feel as if I could take off at any moment."

Conor grinned. "Best stay away from rooftops for a while."

He joked, but Rollan felt a kernel of truth in it. The temptation to soar was almost overwhelming. He felt trapped, cooped up in here. He wanted to get out and ... well.

Essix cried softly, and Rollan ran his palm gently over her feathers. How could Essix, having such freedom, bear to be in a place like this? How did she *ever* come down? The idea of Song putting her in a cage made his blood run cold.

He, too, had tasted freedom. Once when he'd run from the orphanage. Then when he'd been released from jail to the Greencloaks. Each time had felt like walking through a door into a bigger, wider world. But nothing like this.

Nothing like this at all.



THE PANDA

“TWO DOWN, TWO TO GO,” SAID ABEKE. “YOUR TURN, Meilin.” Meilin hesitated, then shook her head. “You’d better go next.” “What’s wrong?” “What do you think?” she snapped. “The creation of the bond token takes total trust, total openness between the human and the spirit animal. I don’t have that. I forced my will on Jhi.”

“Meilin, you and Jhi have come so far since then.” Meilin stared at her friend. “That doesn’t change the fact that the Bile formed my bond. We don’t know how that will influence the process. If I try and create a bond token, at best it could merely fail. At worst ...” She put her hand on Jhi’s soft fur. “It could destroy us both.”

Conor sat down beside her. “We can’t beat Song and the Oathbound without you, Meilin. It’s that simple.”

“I’ll help, but without the bond token.”

“You’re scared?” he asked.

“Of course I am!” Meilin looked at them. They were trying to help, but they couldn’t do the ritual for her. Dread weighed her down like a black rock in her chest.

Jhi snuggled up to her, nuzzling her nose into Meilin's chest. But instead of making Meilin feel better, it made her feel worse. Meilin had no right to bring any harm to the panda.

She gazed into those silver eyes and saw herself reflected.

Did she really look so terrified?

She turned away. "I'll help you, Abeke, but I can't—I won't—go through with this."

"We managed okay," said Conor. "There's no reason to be afraid. I'm sure—"

"You all bonded through Nectar. My relationship with Jhi was poisonous since the very beginning."

"We need you, Meilin." Rollan took her hand, and Meilin felt her cheeks flushing.

Stupid cheeks, she thought.

"You and Jhi came this far together. You've ridden all those waves and storms. Without the two of you, Song and the Oathbound will win. They'll spread misery to every corner of Erdas. Stopping them isn't down to just you, me, Conor, or Abeke. It's not down to the Four Fallen. It's all of us *together*. Always has been, always will be."

They watched her, even the crazy old man, sitting silently with his chin resting on a bony fist. Meilin dearly wished for the ground to rise up and swallow her in that moment. But Jhi sat beside her—unworried, peaceful. That was the panda's strength. She didn't have the leopard's fury or the falcon's speed, but her quietness mattered. Jhi was a rock in the stormy sea. Meilin had to anchor herself to her patient power.

"All right," she said eventually. "I'll do it."

Meilin read through the scroll again, swiftly but intently. Then she knelt in front of the panda, who sat facing her with her legs splayed out.

Meilin took the hairpin in her left hand and reached out with her right.

Jhi twitched her nose. She reached out with her left paw. They touched.

Jhi's pad was warm and leathery. And bigger than Meilin had expected. Jhi was big, something easily forgotten or ignored. Their eyes met, and this time Meilin didn't look away from her reflection. She focused on it. She saw her brow smooth out and her lips relax. She felt Jhi's heartbeat mimic her own ever-so-slight trembles that passed through their palms.

Meilin took a deep breath, as the scroll had instructed.

Her eyelids drooped.

She felt her head lower, until her chin rested on her chest.

Still, they kept contact through their palms.

Something tickled her throat. Meilin coughed. The chamber was dusty.

But the cough didn't clear it. Something slick and foul coated the back of her throat. She coughed again, more forcefully.

Her heartbeat quickened.

Liquid filled her mouth, and she gagged under the oily stench of it. She tried to spit it out, but as she opened her mouth, more poured in.

Opening her eyes, she could see only black liquid pouring down over her face.

Bile!

She tried to twist away, but some invisible power locked her motionless, head tilted back and jaw wide open.

Animals screamed all around her, though she couldn't see them. The Bile covered her face. It ran down her throat, up her nostrils, over her eyes, and into her ears.

No! Let me breathe!

Their cries were horrific. Birds screamed and beasts howled. They cried and roared in agony as they were tortured by the Bile.

Her mind reeled at the torments, not just her drowning, but the suffering all around her. The true, evil nature of the Bile was exposed to her, and she couldn't bear it, thinking that she had subjected Jhi to even a fraction of this pain.

Meilin realized it then. In this moment she was Jhi.

Meilin had used her spirit animal. She'd looked down on the noble panda, dismissed her, and held her in contempt. Jhi hadn't been her ally or friend, she was a servant, or even worse, a slave.

Song was right. She and I are the same.

There was no hiding it. She'd opened herself to the truth, and it was too terrible to take.

The cries grew louder, but then Meilin realized they were not beasts in torment, but her friends, calling her!

She clenched her teeth together. They needed her.

Jhi needed her.

Suddenly, Meilin could feel the panda's calming spirit as her own. She sensed her resolve. Orbs of light began to glow around Meilin, constellations that shone against the darkness. Wherever they appeared, the Bile receded. Though her breath was all spent, Meilin forced her chest under control.

Everything would be all right. For perhaps the first time in her life, Meilin believed it.

"Meilin!"

She opened her eyes.

She breathed. No air had tasted sweeter.

Jhi lay her head on her shoulder and hugged Meilin. The panda's fur smelled of salt and warm damp, but Meilin buried her face into it. She hugged the big bear with all her might, letting the fur absorb her tears.

Then, one after the other, her friends joined them. First Abeke, then Conor, and finally Rollan. They united in the hug until Meilin was surrounded by the best things in her life.



"Are you all right?" asked Abeke.

Meilin drank some more water. The taste of the Bile was still stuck to her throat, but she nodded. "Thanks to you."

Uraza sat on the table, peering down at the two girls. Jhi was curled up in the corner, not quite asleep. Meilin saw the glint of the beast's silvery eyes, keeping watch on her.

Essix fidgeted. She wanted to be out and soaring. The falcon had already ripped the wooden armrest of the chair she was perched on. Briggan sniffed the corners of the room, searching for more food.

"Do you feel any different?" asked Abeke.

"Honestly? No. Just ... relieved." She looked at the hairpin still clenched in her hand. It hadn't changed. There was no surge of power radiating from it, and it wasn't glowing. She slipped it back through her hair. "Well?"

Abeke laughed. "It suits you. But then, everything does."

"Do you two still want to go through with this?" asked Meilin.

Abeke took Uraza's furry cheeks in her hands and gave the leopard a good shake. The beast growled, revealing fangs capable of killing an antelope—and a Niloan girl—with a single bite. Instead, the leopard licked her.

Meilin smirked. "I guess that's a yes."

Abeke rested her arm across the big cat's shoulders. "She's a pussycat really."

Meilin shook her head, amazed at how casually Abeke treated her spirit animal. Not many would dare refer to one of the Great Beasts as a pussycat.

Uraza cast a sidelong glance at Abeke and slowly revealed her claws, a subtle reminder of what she was capable of. Abeke saw it and scoffed. "What are you planning to do? Peel me an apple?"

Uraza's whiskers twitched with mock annoyance, then she folded her paws under her chin and settled down.

Abeke held up her bow, tapping it gently on the leopard's head. The beast closed her eyes, trying hard to ignore her.

Meilin finished the jug of water. The sticky coating was gone from her throat. All trace of the Bile washed away.

The boys gathered around. Their spirit animals stopped their activities and also turned to watch.

Abeke sat down cross-legged and gave a short whistle.

Uraza jumped off the table to land with the barest sound. She padded around in a circle before settling down opposite her bonded human.

Meilin met Abeke's gaze. "Ready?"

Abeke winked. "Ready."



THE LEOPARD

I'M NOT READY.

Abeke had seen the others go through the rituals. How easily they'd mastered their doubts! She'd tried to appear strong, at ease, but as she looked at Uraza, worry gripped her chest.

Have we truly forgiven each other?

The image of Zerif sprang unbidden to her mind. He'd taken control of Uraza and made the big leopard attack her.

Abeke would have died if it hadn't been for Shane.

No, she had to put such thoughts out of her head.

That was then. She and Uraza had renewed their bond, and it was stronger than ever.

Meilin watched her. "Are you all right, Abeke?"

"Yes!" she said cheerfully, but it came out sharper than she wanted. "Just ... just let's not waste any more time." Meilin watched her skeptically.

Abeke still couldn't get Shane out of her mind.

He'd been the first friend she'd made after Uraza appeared in her village. They'd spent all those days training together onboard the Conquerors' ship. She'd trusted him.

She sees the fear in his eyes as she attacks.

He fights, but what chance has he got against her claws and fangs?

The blood shines ...

Abeke cried out. That wasn't her! She didn't kill Shane! He was her friend! He was trying to redeem himself!

Abeke gasped as the memories poured uncontrollably through her. She and Uzara merged.

Shane, poor Shane.

Uraza's savagery overwhelmed her. She saw Shane, lying under her paws, teeth gritted together as he struggled to hold on. But there was that dullness in his eyes, the paleness of his skin as his life faded. He beat against her with his fists. It was pitiful that he thought he could defend himself against the leopard, a born predator. What claws did he have? None. Even after absorbing his spirit animal, he was a soft human boy.

He did not lack courage in those last moments. He did it for Abeke, to save her, and that was hardest to bear.

"I'm sorry, Shane."

She tried to resist the bloodlust, but it was too great. Abeke watched helplessly as she finished Shane off. Her sharp ears heard his heartbeat weaken, then stop. His last breath fell against her bloody fur.

Uraza was a killer.

That was the spirit animal Abeke had bonded with.

How could she have been so naive?

And what sort of person did that make her?

Abeke wanted to scream, to throw off her bloody skin, but her cry transformed into a victorious roar. This was what Uraza did. She celebrated in the kill. Such brutal things were her passion.

Abeke licked her lips; the raw, warm smell made her head spin.

No, no, no ...

Was there anything better than this? The power she held, the beauty of her? The muscles and sinews under the fur were sculpted for this one deed, and this one deed alone. Why shouldn't she celebrate it?

Why else have these claws, or possess sharp fangs, if not to tear and rip asunder?

Anything else was a betrayal of her nature.

Shane lay there, the ground darkening with his blood.

And in that moment, Abeke watched herself mourn him.

She saw herself reach out to put her palm against his cheek.

Uraza felt Abeke's sorrow. Abeke knew it as surely as she knew herself. Her violet eyes softened. As Uraza, she licked Shane's hand, trying to stir it to move.

Her body quivered with guilt. Uraza understood more than Abeke had realized. The regret her leopard had been carrying this whole time! The deep, deep shame.

A mighty heart beat within the cage of her ribs, but Uraza was both fierce and soft. Her fur hid the muscles beneath, but there was beauty, too. Uraza was many things. Hunter, killer, courageous, beautiful, and hers.

Zerif had tried to break that bond. Shane had died to protect it.

She knew it and Uraza knew it, too. They'd gone through so much together. It was inevitable that they would have losses as well as victories. The world revolved around seasons of drought and seasons of plenty.

That's what made the rain so precious.

Abeke lifted her head and gazed at the leopard's spots, no one alike. All were unique to her spirit animal. She could gaze at Uraza's patterns forever.

Uraza licked her face and purred.

Abeke laughed as the big cat rested her forepaws upon her shoulders. She nuzzled her nose into Abeke's ear, her whiskers tickling her cheeks.

Shane had died to save their bond. His passing would weigh heavily in her heart forever, but the best way to remember him, to honor him, would be to become closer to Uraza, not more distant.

Uraza sat her head on Abeke's lap. Abeke drew her fingers along the leopard's fur, making her ears twitch.

She felt complete. She and Uraza were one whole, and greater because of it. Abeke tightened her hold on the bow, their bond token, and sighed deeply.

Meilin put her hand on her shoulder; her brows were wrinkled with worry.

"I'm fine," said Abeke, wiping the last of her tears away.
"We're fine."

In the back of the room, the crazy old man coughed.
"You kids are weird!" he declared cheerfully.



Conor shook Briggan's hairy head. "So, how many times have we saved Erdas?"

Rollan smirked as Essix cried out. "Essix thinks this'll be her fourth, but they had a head start."

Meilin was already halfway up the steps. Jhi bounded up behind her somewhat awkwardly. "Let's not tempt fate. Erdas isn't saved yet."

Uraza growled, and Abeke laughed. "Glad you're so confident."

The steps went around and around. Essix had to grip onto Rollan's shoulders; she couldn't fly in such confines.

Conor raised his hand as they reached the top door.
"Shh."

He leaned against the thick wood and listened. "Four of them. And ... a couple of roast chickens." He licked his lips. "And a plate of lamb chops. Those are mine."

Briggan snorted.

"All right. Ours."

Abeke spoke from the back. "You can tell all that from a sniff?"

Eyes closed, Conor breathed in deeper. "No. I can tell that the cheese is stale, there's a jug of ale, and that two of the guards haven't washed in the last week. One's got a toothache."

"You can smell a toothache?"

"Upper molar on the left. Rotted all the way through."

Conor took a step back, his eyes flashing with excitement. "Time to make an entrance."

He kicked the door open.

Conor's nose had been right. There were four Oathbound in the guardroom. Two sat around a small table, each caught mid-snack on a piece of roast chicken. The third held a pair of pliers in the wide-open mouth of a fourth, leaning far back on a stool.

Startled by the sudden attack, the soldier with the pliers pulled hard, and the other man screamed as a bloody tooth came out and he fell backward.

Conor grinned. "Is now a bad time?"

They fumbled for their weapons, but it was all too late.

Uraza catapulted across the room, slamming her forepaws onto one of the Oathbound's chest. He tumbled, his armor clanging loudly like cymbals. He stopped only when he hit the wall, and Uraza stood inches from him, letting him have a good look at her teeth.

Essix shrieked and circled over them, darting in to tear at the face of another guard. He waved his halberd around, too wildly in a room so small and crowded. He knocked his fellow Oathbound across the head and down he went,

tossing up the chicken. In came Briggan. The big wolf barked once, then settled his paws on the man's chest.

Jhi did more than that. She lumbered over to the man missing his tooth and sat down on him. At least she licked his face. The guard's look of pain softened a bit.

The last guard merely raised his hand.

Meilin pointed at him. "Drop the chicken."

He did.

Abeke looked around the room. How long had that taken? Mere seconds. She joined Uraza and the terrified guard. "I'm going to ask you a few questions. You're going to answer them truthfully, aren't you?"

He nodded. Which wasn't easy, as he was still upside down.

"Where is Song?"

The man stared at Uraza. "Sh-she's gone back down to the beach with some others. I think."

Uraza growled.

"Please, that's all I know! It's the truth!"

"How many other Oathbound are with them?"

"Just the empress and her inner circle."

Abeke frowned. With the stakes being so high, it would be a bloody battle, but at least it wasn't an army.

The room had plenty of manacles, so Meilin chained the guards. Abeke took the keys and threw them out the small grille.

She turned to the crazy old man, who'd been following their every step. "Keep close. When we tell you to run, run."

He slapped his thighs. "Run like a gazelle!"

"Or just as fast as you can."

They made their way to the outside courtyard.

The sky was unnaturally dark. Morning was still a few hours ahead, but black clouds blocked what moonlight there was. Lightning flashed angrily across the horizon.

Horses neighed in their stables, but otherwise the courtyard was empty. The bad weather had driven everyone to shelter.

Everyone, that is, apart from the soldiers at the gate.

These men weren't Oathbound, but they weren't lounging like the guards earlier. They were in full armor and had their weapons in hand.

Two carried crossbows. They stood safe upon the top platform. Essix could get to them, but Abeke wouldn't want to risk the bird being shot like that.

"We'll have to charge them," suggested Rollan.

Meilin shook her head. "We'll get skewered on their spears. We're stuck."

"No, no, you're not."

Abeke and the others turned. The old man stepped forward.

He narrowed his eyes. "Leave them to me."

The crazy old man started across the courtyard, shouting as he went.

Abeke sprinted after him. "Get back here!"

The soldiers turned to face them. One of them wore the golden helmet of a Zhongese captain. "You! Halt!"

Abeke tensed as Uraza growled at her side. Looks as if they were fighting after all.

The old man gazed at the lead soldier. "Captain Chang, isn't it?"

"Do I know you?"

"Have I changed so much?" said the old man.

Then something strange happened. The old man pulled back his sleeve and a crane burst forth. The great white bird spread its wings, rising to perch on the roof of the gatehouse.

The captain turned from the bird to the old man. "Ambassador Ying?"

The old man scratched his beard. "The same."

Abeke glanced over to Meilin, who shrugged. What was going on?

The old man beckoned the soldiers. "Tell your men to stand down and let these youngsters pass. They're here to stop Song."

"The empress? She gave strict instructions—"

"The empress murdered her own father for the crown," declared the ambassador. "Let these children pass."

He spoke with an authority that belied his frail, thin frame. Even the smallest of the soldiers was twice his size, but they all faltered.

Ambassador Ying frowned. "I am not used to repeating myself."

The captain drew his sword and Abeke nocked an arrow. Uraza tensed, settling back on her haunches so she could catapult herself forward.

The sword clanged on the stony ground. The captain turned to his men. "Drop your weapons and open the gate!"

All around them, spears and halberds dropped; the men set to work on the massive winch that controlled the main gate.

A cold wind blew in off the cliffs. The sound of the crashing waves grew louder.

Ambassador Ying bowed to Abeke and the others. "I'm sorry for the subterfuge, but I needed to be sure."

"Sure of what?" asked Conor.

"That you were worthy of Olvan's trust," said the old man. "I am, or was, the Greencloak ambassador to Zhong's royal court. It was I who oversaw Song's Nectar Ceremony. I saw the delight in the young girl's eyes when her water dragon emerged from the sea, and saw that delight turn bitter, thanks to her father's contempt. I tried to reason with him, only to be exiled." He grimaced at the sad memory. "After his death I hoped to help Song and heal some of the pain she'd suffered over the years; instead I learned she had been behind the emperor's death and the

framing of the Greencloaks. But I was imprisoned before I could bring proof to the other lords of Zhong.”

Abeke spoke. “Why didn’t you trust us earlier?”

Then man sighed. “Child, my empress—a girl who I’d watched grow up—murdered her own father. And yet ... I understood why. The emperor was a tyrant, all the more so to his daughter. If you’d seen what he put her through ...” Ying shook his head. “Even as she had me arrested, I pitied her. But Song’s ambitions will destroy us all. Seeing you all truly bond with your spirit animals, I realized the truth. Those relics are too dangerous in her hands. You must get them back.”

Abeke frowned. “This conversation is not over, Ambassador.”

“But it can wait,” he replied. “You have to stop her.”

With a heavy clang, the gates locked into position, fully raised.

Briggan howled, and Uraza padded forward. The big leopard looked back at Abeke expectantly.

Abeke tightened her hold on her bow. Was it truly a bond token? How would she know? “I’m coming,” she said.



20

SID

RAIN LASHED DOWN ONTO THEM AS THEY CREPT OUT OF the palace. Abeke shivered under the cold, stinging pellets. Uraza shook herself all the way down to a flick of her tail, throwing off the raindrops. She padded up ahead, growling softly.

The skies heaved with black clouds. Back home this would be cause for celebration; who knew better than her, the Rain Dancer?

Yet these clouds were angry, and they made it known through thunderous clashes and vicious shards of the lightning. Great sheets of light lit the mountainous clouds.

“Song will be down by the beach,” said Meilin. “We need to—”

“Children, shouldn’t you be indoors? And locked up?”

Sid the Generous stood in the middle of the path leading to the cliffs. He wore Stormspeaker and a new suit of brass armor. There were golden rings on his fingers, and his belt was made of silver and golden plates.

“We’ll make this easy for you, Sid,” said Conor. “We’ll count to ten. Just run.”

Sid drew his sword. It was bright, and very sharp. "You expect *me* to run? Did you not notice *this*?" He tapped the crown.

"We don't have time for this," said Meilin. Her gaze was on the heaving waves beyond. The sea boiled. The choppy water was blacker than the clouds.

"We can't have him calling for reinforcements," said Rollan. "We need to deal with him."

Abeke agreed. "No time like the present."

Conor pointed to the east. "There's another path down to the beach."

"I'll deal with Sid," said Rollan. "Go."

"After me," said Abeke. She nocked an arrow. "A simple leg wound should do the trick."

At this range, less than a dozen yards, she couldn't miss. Sid didn't move. Maybe he thought he could dodge aside at the last second? But no one was that quick.

Abeke loosed the arrow.

A flash of lightning dazzled her for a moment. When Abeke glanced back, she found Sid was unharmed. "Want to try again?" he said.

Meilin put her hand on Abeke's shoulder. "We'll meet you down by the beach." She nodded to Conor, and off they ran, leaving Rollan and Abeke to deal with Sid the Generous.

Abeke nocked another arrow, creeping closer. Sid waved his sword between them, beckoning her to try again. His crown shimmered. Minute sparks jumped across its spikes.

The air around her crackled. Her hair stood on end....

"Abeke!"

Rollan knocked her over as the air exploded and a lightning bolt struck the ground. The flash blinded her and her head rang from the noise of the strike. Rollan cried out and rolled aside as Sid swiped down with his sword. Sparks jumped from the blade's edge, leaping across a rock.

Sid laughed as the two of them scrambled back to their feet. "That's why it's called Stormspeaker. You never did get much of a chance to use it, did you?"

The air around Sid buzzed. Blue electric bolts jumped along his sword blade, and his skin crackled with energy.

Abeke shot two arrows, barely aiming, but each flew true.

Two whips of lightning erupted from the crown, incinerating the first and slicing the other in half. "That the best you can do?"

Then he attacked.

One moment he was twenty yards away and then he was there, right before her. Uraza roared a warning. Abeke ducked as Sid cut. He stabbed at Rollan, who only barely managed to pull back. Sid laughed as he slashed again, tearing a hole in Rollan's shirt.

Rollan glared. Tarik's cloak billowed behind him, almost like a pair of great wings.

Uraza leaped in to attack. She slammed Sid squarely in the stomach, and the two of them fell. But Sid sprang to his feet with astonishing—lightning—speed. Even Uraza was hard pressed to dodge his blows. The leopard suffered a deep cut along her ribs before retreating.

Puffing for breath, Sid drew back his sleeve and a moment later his wolverine flashed into existence. The beast's fur stood on end as it snarled at them. Sid smiled. "Slasher's been bored sitting on my arm. He wants some blood. He wonders what the blood of the Four Fallen tastes like?"

The bleeding leopard and the wolverine circled one another, snapping their teeth. The wolverine lacked Uraza's speed, but more than made up for it with bulk and wickedly sharp claws. Abeke wanted to shoot him, but didn't dare shift her attention from Sid. They locked eyes, and she knew he was waiting for her to drop her guard, even for a fraction of a second.

Slasher leaped forward, but Uraza sprang aside, her tail twitching away at the last instant. The wolverine snapped his jaws, but Uraza twisted with feline grace, raking her claws along the wolverine's flanks.

The big beast whimpered.

Uraza growled, and Slasher backed away, spitting with rage, and a little fear.

He snapped his big jaws, but Uraza fell silent, and her haunches twitched. Abeke knew the move all too well.

Slasher looked at Sid.

"Go on, finish her!" he yelled at him.

Uraza sprang forward, faster than a blink. She spun in midair, an impossible move for anything but a cat, and clamped her teeth on the back of the wolverine's neck. She bit down and tore off a thick clump of fur.

Slasher screamed and rolled over, kicking and clawing as Uraza snapped at him. She cuffed him across the jaw, and that was enough.

The big wolverine fled.

"Come back here! Come back!" Sid cried out after his spirit animal.

Abeke raised an eyebrow. "You should have spent more time working on your bond, Sid."

Uraza growled, her violet eyes on the Oathbound.

Essix shrieked as she circled above them. Sid bellowed, then thrust his sword skyward. A bolt of lightning tore free from the clouds. Essix wheeled away as sparks smoked her wingtips.

"Leave her alone!" screamed Rollan. He jumped at Sid and—

Abeke gasped. Rollan blurred between them and struck Sid with both fists. Sid tumbled head over heels, but Rollan

...

Rollan flew. His cloak billowed behind him in the storm winds, carrying him upward ten feet, twenty, fifty. Even

from here, Abeke saw the boy's eyes shine with fury. He curled up, bringing his knees to his chest, then dove.

Sid scurried to his feet, stunned and bewildered. Only at the last second did he see Rollan. He cried out, releasing a blistering wall of lightning bolts.

Rollan spun between them, too fast to be hit.

Slam!

Rollan turned at the last moment and rammed both feet into Sid's chest. He skimmed over the ground, barely slowing, before winging back into the air.

"How ... how ...?" Sid gasped, clutching his chest. Judging by his wheezing, there were a few cracked ribs under his armor. Sid used his sword to push himself up. Then he turned to Abeke and glared. "You'll pay, girl! You will *pay*!"

Abeke sent out two more arrows, but Sid turned both to ash with a flick of his wrist. The power in the crown was building. Stormspeaker hummed, shooting sparks in all directions. Sid's skin turned a radiant blue. The rain fizzled as it struck him, and his armor ... *glowed*.

Where was Rollan? Had the storm taken him? Abeke couldn't search the skies for him, not with Sid about to attack.

The Oathbound shook as the power of the crown filled his body. Even his eyes shimmered with blue light. He cried out and charged.

A wall of supercharged air burst forward. Abeke only just jumped away. But it was a jump that carried her twenty feet through the air, and she landed lightly on her toes. Even when drawing on Uraza's grace, Abeke had never made a jump that far.

"That's not possible," whispered Sid.

"My turn," said Abeke. She'd seen Uraza do this so often, and it always amazed her how the leopard could cover vast distances with seemingly little effort.

Abeke pounced. Just a slight squeeze and a push from her thighs, and she sailed in a high arc, coming down toward Sid, who just stared with his mouth gaping.

She rammed the tip of her bow into his chest and the discharge of electricity jolted them both in opposite directions.

But as the storm grew, Sid's power multiplied. Already the sparks thickened, forming a flashing shield around him.

He yelled as he slammed his sword down onto her bow. Again and again he struck, yet the seemingly fragile wood held, even as the bolts exploded around them.

"Why ... won't ... it ... break?" he screamed at each blow. He was mad with fury; any skill he had was abandoned in his single-minded rage to smash Abeke to pieces.

But with each thunderbolt, his power decreased. Sid didn't realize what he was doing; he was too filled with blind anger, but Abeke felt it. Each blow was weaker than the last.

She waited until he raised his sword again, then jumped away with a roar. Abeke turned in midair and rammed both heels into his back.

Sid tumbled again, and the Stormspeaker crown rolled off his head.

They both stared at it as it rolled down the path, toward the cliff's edge.

"No!" screamed Sid. All thoughts of the fight were abandoned as he chased after the speeding circlet. "No!"

It rolled faster and faster.

The crown struck a stone and bounced up in the air, spinning and spinning.

"No!" screamed Sid as it went over the edge. "Noooo!"

Whoosh!

Rollan rose up along the cliff face, grinning. "Lost something?"

He held the crown in the crook of his finger.

Sid turned around. That arrogance was gone, vanished with the swiftness of a lightning bolt. He still held his sword, but the blade looked dull and blunt now. He stared at it, then at Abeke.

Uraza padded up to him and growled. She let Sid get a good close look at those deadly fangs of hers.

Sid threw away the sword and dropped to his knees. "Please, I surrender."

Abeke loaded her last arrow onto her bow. "Rollan? Tie him up."

Rollan landed lightly. His cloak ruffled around his shoulders, then turned limp as plain cloth. He undid Sid's belt and tied his hands behind his back. Then he nudged Sid to lie facedown in the dirt.

"One down," said Rollan.

But Abeke didn't reply. Instead she walked to the cliff's edge and looked down toward the stony beach. The sea was ... rising.

The battle was far from over.



21

KANA AND CORDELIA

A FIERCE FEVER COURSED THROUGH CONOR. HE PANTED on the cliff's edge, his skin too hot to feel the biting rain. He was barefoot, his thin shirt shredded and hanging in tatters, but he barely felt the wind howling in from the sea.

Thunderous waves crashed against the black granite rocks, and storm clouds boomed together above him. Lightning flared and crackled.

Every muscle burned. He could barely contain the feral power that threatened to explode his heart.

Conor threw back his head and howled.

Briggan joined him, baying at the sky. Conor had never felt such kinship. The bond they had surpassed anything they'd previously known.

He paused, and sniffed the air. "A scent," he growled.

Meilin looked around. "There's no one here."

He crouched down, almost on all fours. He wrinkled up his nose. "There is."

A cluster of rocks lay ahead of them. The rocks were old and covered in moss, their gray blending to green to match the grass tufts that covered the cliff top.

There was nothing there to *see....*

"Kana," he growled. "Come out."

The shadows between two of the larger boulders moved. One moment the path ahead was clear, then the next there stood the captain of the Oathbound. Her chameleon was settled on her shoulder.

Kana nodded at Conor. "So much for my ambush."

Meilin's gaze darkened.

Conor didn't need his second sight to know what would have happened. They would have walked straight past Kana, and one of them would have gotten a sword in their backs before they'd even realized the danger.

"It doesn't have to be like this," said Meilin, stepping forward. Jhi stood up beside her, and for a moment Conor wondered if the Great Panda would attack. Instead, Jhi watched the woman with a curious gaze.

"Out of my way, Meilin," Conor said. "I'll deal with her. She can't hide from me while I hold the staff."

But Meilin only stepped closer to Kana. "Please, you know what Song's become. You know what carnage will follow if you let her carry on."

Kana put her hand on the amulet around her neck, the Heart of the Land. "Song's rewarded me well for my loyalty. It is my duty to protect her."

"Song's greatest enemy is herself," Meilin persisted. "She's on the path of destruction and ruin, Kana. And you know it."

All Conor could do was watch. But he saw the doubts fill Kana's eyes.

"I cannot betray my friend."

"I'm not asking you to betray Song." Meilin was only a few feet from Kana. The length of a sword blade. Yet Meilin held out her hand. "I'm asking you to help us save her."

Conor held his breath. Kana still gripped her sword, and he was too far to help.

But Jhi was with Meilin. She padded up to Kana and looked up at her with her silvery eyes.

Meilin gently touched her hairpin, and Conor could almost feel the waves of ... serenity ... of *peace* radiating from Meilin.

Sometimes it was easy to forget there were other ways to resolve misery and strife. The quiet ways, too often drowned out by the din of battle and the clash of weapons. Looking at Meilin and Jhi together, Conor couldn't help but marvel at the tranquil strength they held.

Hairpin in place, Meilin was the quiet center in the storm. If only more could hear this silence: the tranquility of Jhi the Peacefinder.

Conor saw Kana drop her sword. *She* had heard that silence.

Kana looked at Meilin. "Please. Help me save my friend."

Smiling, Meilin held out her hand. "I'll do—"

An arc of flame exploded through the air, striking Kana and sending Meilin and Jhi crashing to the ground.

Conor wiped the rain from his eyes and growled from deep in the back of his throat.

Cordelia stood a distance away, both hands firmly gripping the hilt of the Wildcat's Claw. Flames licked the bare steel, and the raindrops hissed into steam as they fell upon the metal. She sneered at them. "Kana, you traitor."

Kana lay on the flame-scorched earth, moaning. The flames had hit her hard. Conor could barely look at the damage they'd done. But Jhi was kneeling beside her, and Conor could feel, even from where he stood, the gentle waves of healing energy radiating from the giant bear.

Meilin leaped beside him, clutching Kana's discarded sword, but Conor shook his head.

He glanced back at the mortally injured Kana. "Go! Help her! Jhi will need you."

Then, teeth gritted, he turned to face Cordelia. "She's mine."

"Think you can beat me, dog?" sneered Cordelia. Despite the pouring rain, she stood steady. "Come here and I'll turn your pet into my rug."

Briggan snarled and circled the Oathbound killer.

Conor's heart pumped hot, raging blood through him. He smelled the sweat upon Cordelia's brow, the oil upon her armor, and even the animal fat she'd used on her boots as polish. He could hear Cordelia's beating heart, her ragged breaths, and even in the firelight of her blade, he saw her hesitation.

Cordelia the Kind was used to lashing helpless sailors, beating down on the weak. Now she was looking at someone who wasn't afraid to fight her, someone who actually *relished* facing her.

In spite of himself, Conor grinned, baring his teeth the way he'd seen Briggan bare his own a thousand times. His hand clenched the crook at his side.

His bond with Briggan had opened up the world in so many ways, but that bond didn't compare to what was happening now—nor the pure joy he felt.

The joy of the hunt.

Conor howled as he charged, startling even Cordelia.

He crashed into her and they tumbled over the rocky ground. Cordelia rammed the hilt of her sword into his back as Conor swiped at her with his shepherd's crook. She kicked him in the chest, and the pair rolled apart. Conor sprang to his feet while Cordelia stumbled, stunned by his ferocity, and weighed down by her armor. "An animal, that's all you are ..."

Conor saw the attacks before they came. It was just so clear what Cordelia would do. He spun and easily dodged her blows.

Cordelia screamed at him, wild incoherent cries of rage and frustration as killing blows missed by inches. Conor responded with heavy blows of his own, kicks and punches,

battering her down until she swayed, fanning flames out from the sword to hold him off.

Briggan joined in, snapping and clawing at any slight opening in Cordelia's defenses. The wolf leaped and pounced from all directions. He buried his fangs into Cordelia's leg armor, almost throwing her down. Cordelia swung with her sword, stabbing him, and the wound scored Briggan's shoulder. The wolf's attacks only became more ferocious.

"Filthy animal!" Cordelia screamed. She took a two-handed grip on the sword and bore down on Conor with a series of savage slashes.

Conor tightened his grip upon his crook as each blow fell.

"Nothing but a stick, that's all you have. I'll turn it into kindling!" snarled Cordelia.

Conor gave her a toothy grin. Then, without thought, he threw up his crook.

The Wildcat's Claw bit into the wood, an inch from Conor's skull. If he'd been a moment too slow ... And yet he knew the blow would come. Just as he seemed to know more and more of what was to come. And who would eventually win this fight.

"Break!" screamed Cordelia, heaving her whole weight behind the sword. "Why won't you break?"

Yet Conor's crook held fast, despite the steel edge and the flames. He'd seen that sword slice through stone as if it were nothing, but the old wood held.

They fought on, each landing blows that would have crippled a normal person. Briggan's near limitless endurance kept Conor standing, despite the bleeding cuts across his limbs and torso, and Cordelia's sword gave her the fury and swiftness of the legendary wildcat.

But Conor needed this fight to be over soon. Something terrible was coming. He felt it like a flood rushing over him.

Cordelia's armor protected her from the worst of the blows, but he had no such protection. Cordelia knew it. She was smiling. "Your legs starting to feel a bit wobbly, boy? That's the blood loss. All my little scratches, they add up in the end."

Conor wasn't interested in wasting time on talk. A dark shape was filling his vision. A great and all-consuming wave. He could see it clearly. Too clearly. It was the same wave from his dreams, and it was headed toward ...

Huge waves battered the cliffs. Conor watched a chunk of rock crack. It tumbled away to crash into the sea.

"Song's using the Dragon's Eye," said Cordelia. She chuckled. "She took to it quickly. It's powerful, boy, especially when combined with her water dragon. Soon she'll be sending a tidal wave all the way across the sea. It'll build, mile by mile, and when it hits Greenhaven? Your Greencloak friends won't be getting any trial."

Conor saw it all. How could he have missed it before? The future was laid out to him, as clear as Cordelia's burning eyes.

But no future was totally certain.

"Your mistress isn't the first to try and destroy the Greencloaks," he said. "And she won't be the last."

"Either way, you won't be around to find out."

Cordelia jabbed, then reversed her blow, catching Conor's staff and knocking it out of his hands. It flipped ten feet away.

Unarmed, Conor felt Briggan's strength suddenly drain from him. His second sight cut away abruptly, leaving Conor feeling momentarily blind. He could barely hold Cordelia back. A deep cut across his ribs had him gasping; another along his thigh brought him to one knee.

But the wolf in him wouldn't, couldn't, give up. Even as Cordelia raised her sword to finish him off, he leaped forward, grabbing her wrists.

"Let go!" she yelled.

He couldn't hold on for long. Conor's head swam. Cordelia, seeing his injured side, rammed her knee into the heavily bleeding wound, laughing as she did it again and again.

Conor fought against the pain and weariness threatening to bring him down. He grabbed at the sword in Cordelia's hand.

They struggled and slipped. The rain had made the rocky, bare edge of the cliffs treacherous underfoot. Barefoot, Conor's feet suddenly burned with pain, but he found easy purchase on the stone. Cordelia still wore the heavy, stiff armored boots she'd fallen in the sea with during their last fight.

She twisted the sword from his weakening grip, and Conor stumbled back.

Smiling, Cordelia pulled the sword past her shoulder and swung.

Conor ducked.

Cordelia spun on the spot, carried away by the force of her swing. She screamed as it carried her over the edge.

Conor ran to the side of the cliff.

Cordelia hung a few feet below, her fingers clenched around the section of rock. She still held the Wildcat's Claw in the other hand.

Conor cursed. The temptation of leaving her to fall was powerful. But he flattened himself on the ground and reached out. "Take my hand."

Cordelia glared at him.

"Drop the sword and take my hand," ordered Conor. "It's the only way."

"No! The Claw is mine!"

"Don't be a fool, Cordelia!"

Cordelia screamed as she thrust the sword tip at him in a desperate lunge. But the tip struck against the rock, a jarring blow that shook Cordelia loose.

Their eyes met. The rage in hers faltered as her fingers came away from the rock. She began tilting away from the cliff face.

Her eyes widened, first in shock, then in fear. Still she held on to the precious sword.

Cordelia opened her mouth, but if she screamed Conor didn't hear it over the thunder of the waves. They seemed to reach up for her as she fell. Cordelia was there, and then she was not.

Conor groaned and sank into the ground.

It wasn't the pain from his cuts. Those felt distant and vague. It was the weariness. Conor couldn't move; his entire body lay there, like lifeless stone.

He tingled, suddenly chilly. Then he didn't feel much at all as a strange, peaceful numbness spread over him.

Briggan sat down beside him, pressing his warm furry body against his own. The wolf panted, his eyes bright and concerned. He licked Conor's face. Conor laughed, but his chest ached.

"Conor!" Suddenly, Meilin was beside him. She turned him over and he saw shock spread across her face. "Oh, no. Oh, please ..."

He wanted to tell her he was fine, but moving his lips was too much effort. So was keeping his eyes open.

"No, you don't," she said. Meilin put her hands upon the wide tear across his side.

The feeling of heaviness ... lifted.

The numbness fell away as he warmed. A fresh, pulsing energy ran through him. Conor heard his heart pounding with new strength.

He opened his eyes. "I knew you would save me," Conor said. "I saw it."

Meilin smiled, looking puzzled. "How are you feeling?"

Conor sat up. The wound on his ribs had gone. There wasn't even a scar. "I feel ... like new."

"Good." Meilin helped him to his feet. "Because we now need to stop that."

Waves, fifty feet high at least, pounded the cliffs, sending tremors through the rocks and into Conor's bones. The sky was thick with swirling storm clouds, and lightning blistered the blackness.

Down on the beach, among the crashing waves, Song stood alone. She held the Dragon's Eye aloft and it glowed with power.

Out in the swirling waves, Conor saw her water dragon. He watched him glide, row upon row of spiky scales cutting through the surface. Finally the tail pounded the surface, driving the creature under. It was easily as tall and as broad as an oak trunk.

The Dragon's Eye had transformed the small water dragon into a gargantuan monster.

"How's Kana?" Conor asked, collecting the shepherd's crook from the ground. As soon as it was in his hands he felt stronger. His heart beat again with the blood of the wolf.

"She'll live," Meilin said. She pointed behind him. Conor turned to find Kana sitting up beside Jhi. The burns had been reduced to a faint reddening of her skin. Her arms were wrapped around herself. Toey, her chameleon, was nestled on her shoulder. The Oathbound captain had tears running down her face. She suddenly looked very young.

"Please," Kana said, her voice cracking. "You have to stop Song."



22

SONG AND MEILIN

MEILIN COULD BARELY STAND AS THE WIND REACHED hurricane proportions. Zhong's coast was vulnerable to such winds, but not this time of year, and never so swiftly.

The waves beat against the cliffs with terrifying fury. It was as if the sea had a mind, but one consumed with unquenchable rage.

She stared down at the ships in the docks. One had been ripped free and was even now being pummeled by the rising sea. Another, also torn from its holding, was wrecked against the rocks that embraced the quayside. She saw men floundering in the churning waters.

And the cliffs themselves shook, unable to withstand the onslaught.

Apart from the wreckage now littering the beach down below, there was just one figure. Her loose hair fanned out in the wild winds. Her elegant green robes billowed around her. The Dragon's Eye, held aloft, shone with a brilliant rainbow of colors.

"Song," muttered Conor. He was breathing hard and his torso was splashed with blood, but the fire in his eyes

burned with feral intensity. “We need to get down there.”

Out in the dark, deep sea, Meilin saw how the waves were building. Each rose a few feet higher than the last. Song stood balanced on a huge boulder, but Meilin didn’t think it would be long before the beach was submerged. Didn’t she realize that?

Abeke joined them at the cliff’s edge. She pointed to the narrow path leading down. “We need to take the Dragon’s Eye from her.”

Rollan glided down out of the storm, accompanied by Essix. His cloak fluttered around his shoulders, the tips still dancing in the breeze. “I’ll fly down there and distract her.”

A loud rumble turned their attention away from the beach to the palace.

A tower swayed as the ground beneath it cracked. It tilted this way and that, not quite falling, as more and more cracks broke along its marble surface. Then it leaned over the cliff and first the uppermost level broke away, disintegrating into smaller clunks as the pieces shattered upon the granite cliffs. The rest of the tower soon followed, breaking apart into countless white stones. They burst upon the black rocks below and were instantly swallowed by the sea.

“It’s all coming down,” Meilin said with horror. “The whole cliff’s collapsing, and the palace is going with it.”

Even from where they stood, they could see people fleeing—servants, soldiers, and other nobles. Walls ripped apart and roofs caved in. The tall, elegant windows along the palace façade shattered.

Meilin turned to Jhi. “Go to the palace. Help the injured as best you can.”

The big panda hesitated.

Meilin touched the hairpin. “With this, I’ll always have you with me. Go. Let me deal with Song.”

The panda wrapped her paws around Meilin, and Meilin felt a surge of warm, supportive strength pass into her.

Then the panda ran, in her own funny way, off to the collapsing palace.

Down on the beach, Song didn't so much as turn her head toward her crumbling palace. She was focused on the rising tsunami.

And the creature stirring within the battling waves.

Scales rippled just under the surface. A tail, as long and as thick as any column, flicked from side to side.

Conor frowned. "Song's water dragon has grown a bit since we last saw him."

Lightning cracked in the tumultuous black clouds. Rain lashed down, sharp and stinging and hard. The raindrops were thrown horizontal by the howling winds.

Meilin looked to her friends, poised on the edge of the cliff top. Conor grinned, then raised his head and howled. It was a challenge, it seemed to her: a cry of defiance at nature itself. He stretched out his arms, eyes closed, relishing the elemental attack. Then he gritted his teeth and bounded along the crumbling cliff path with Briggan beside him.

It was a long way down. Meilin hated the way the pebbles broke off the edge of the path with every tremor. But she needed to stop Song.

How big was Seaspray now? When they'd arrived, Meilin could have carried him in her arms. But now? Even his tail seemed to go on forever.

He turned and turned, churning the sea, creating waves that grew as they spread away from the center. Those crashing against these cliffs were forty or fifty feet high. But the waves being carried toward Greenhaven—how high would they grow?

Enough to drown the island, unless they stopped Song.

Step lightly, and step fast.

Could the path take her weight? Many of the steps had already cracked. Meilin moved on tiptoe, jumping from one

ledge to another, never pausing lest the ground beneath her give way.

The cliff shook, and she curled up as rocks tumbled down, showering her with grit and earth.

"Meilin!"

Abeke grabbed her arm and hauled her away as a boulder crashed down the cliff, taking more rock with it.

Any one of those could have turned me to bloody pulp.

Heart in her throat, she could only nod her thanks. Abeke winked. "I'll see you down there." Then she squatted down and leaped, clearing a dozen feet and seemingly running over the path without touching it.

Uraza stopped beside her, tail twitching.

Meilin looked down at her. "I'll be fine. You go."

The leopard didn't wait for her to change her mind. She pounced from one boulder to another after Abeke.

A wave struck, throwing Meilin against the cliff. She gulped down a rush of freezing seawater. The weight of it pushed her hard into the stone surface. Meilin panicked, sure that the water would crush her, but then it surged away just as her air ran out. Meilin stood, shivering, bedraggled, and gasping on the uneven path. Looking down, she saw that she was still fifty feet above the beach.

And within the madness there was Song. The empress stepped up onto a higher rock, holding the Dragon's Eye aloft. She was still raising the sea to greater, more monstrous heights.

"Song!" Meilin yelled, her voice battling against the winds. "You have to stop! You're going to destroy everything!"

Song turned. Somehow she had heard Meilin over the thunder and the crashing waves. But Song just laughed, scornful of Meilin's desperate plea.

The Eye was smashing everything around it, but Song didn't care. She'd been granted unimaginable power, and

she wanted to use it. The price didn't matter.

"Song! Please! You have to stop!"

Another wave crashed against the cliff, but Meilin was ready. Taking a huge breath, she dove into the sea.

The churning black waters tossed her over and over. Meilin covered her head, in case she was smashed back against the cliff.

She couldn't fight such power. She could only be carried by it. Her father had trained her in martial arts from an early age, so Meilin knew how to deal with opponents bigger and stronger than her.

She relaxed, allowing herself to be rolled, then carried out in the backwash.

Now she beat her arms and legs as hard as she could, finally breaking the surface.

The beach was almost fully submerged. Nothing remained of the ships or docks but shattered splinters and ragged sails. Whole sections of the cliff had sheared away, forming a jagged, uneven range of peaks and plinths. The slanted stone was slick with seawater and clumps of earth.

Meilin gritted her teeth and headed to one of the largest stones, the one where Song stood.

Where were the others?

Abeke leaped from rock to rock, but could not yet reach Song. An enormous whirlpool had formed between them, spinning madly. Uraza prowled along the water's edge, roaring in frustration.

Rollan rode the winds, but the air was buffeting him back. The churning sea exploded at him with fists of water.

Conor battled against the monstrous water dragon out among the waves. Briggan rode the gigantic lizard's back, clawing at his scales, looking for an opening. Seaspray lashed out and snapped his jaws, which were big enough to break a ship apart. But Conor seemed to know where the dragon's chaotic bites would fall before even he did. As Seaspray smashed into a recently abandoned rock, Conor

jumped on the lizard's back, high up between his shoulder blades. Seaspray roared and shook, tossing Briggan into the water, but Conor held on, having found a spot the water dragon couldn't reach.

They couldn't beat the water dragon, but they kept him distracted enough.

Meilin's whole body ached from her swim, but Song's rock was a few yards away. She needed to push just a little bit harder.

The sudden surge slammed her against the rock, winding her. Meilin hooked herself onto the slippery stone as the water receded. She hung there, gasping.

She flicked her hair from her face and stood up. "Song. Stop it. Now."

The princess spun around, startled. Then she smiled and laughed mockingly. "Meilin! Look at you! The pretty general's daughter resembles a drowned rat."

Meilin didn't even have enough strength to stand up straight. She slouched, her legs wobbling from sheer exhaustion. The swim hadn't been far, but it felt as if she'd fought the entire sea to get here.

Song held out the Dragon's Eye. "Here. Take it. If you can."

"This isn't a game. Thousands will die if you go any further."

Song smiled. "Take it."

Meilin shot out her hand, but Song's blow was lightning fast, a heel palm strike that almost knocked Meilin back into the sea. She tottered on the edge, arms flailing, while Song laughed.

"Come now, Meilin. Is that the best you can do? I had heard your father trained you to be a great warrior. Well, I trained, too, you see, far from the eyes of my father. All in preparation for the day I would kill him."

Meilin shook the last of the fuzziness from her head. She planted her feet firmly on the water-slick rock and flexed

her fingers.

Song shifted her weight from one foot to another, keeping high on the balls of her feet. She needed to be wary of—

Song's first kick flicked out low. Meilin blocked, but the blow had barely touched her before Song spun and smacked her other heel right into Meilin's jaw.

This time she fell.

"Poor Meilin," muttered Song. "That feint is the oldest trick in the book."

It was, and she'd fallen for it.

Meilin got back up. She glared at the princess.

Song's gaze darkened. "I thought you of all people would understand. You truly are pathetic, Meilin. Happy to stand in the shadows of lesser folk, allowing them to take charge and rule your life. I would pity you if I wasn't so disgusted."

Meilin shook her head. "Well, I do pity you, Song. What have you achieved? Death and destruction. You'll find the throne room a lonely place. Even if all the kingdoms of Erdas bow down before you, it will be an empty victory. No one will trust you. No one will admire you. They'll fear and hate you. Just as you feared and hated your father." She held out her hand. "There's still time to turn back, Song. Kana is waiting for you up at the palace."

Meilin felt a strange, peaceful energy radiating out with her words. The hairpin. Her connection to Jhi, the Peacefinder, had imbued their bond token with an uncanny ability to calm the anguished. This was how Meilin had finally overcome Kana—not with blows, but with words. It was Jhi's greatest gift.

And it wasn't working.

Song screamed and launched forward.

Song's blows rained down, but they were clumsy and unfocused. All skill and tactics vanished in her rage. A twist, a deflection, a side step robbed Song of their power,

while Meilin came in close, denying the empress her most powerful kicking attacks.

Meilin needed the Dragon's Eye.

A wrist lock forced Song to her knees. "Drop the Eye, Song," Meilin said. "Drop it!" She added a little more pressure, and Song screamed. "Just drop it and this can all be over!"

"Meilin! Look out!"

She turned toward the cry. Abeke stood, balanced perilously on a shard of rock, pointing to the sea.

Meilin looked.

Song's water dragon rose up out of the water, jaws widening as he bore down on her.

Seaspray had come to save his partner.

The distraction was enough for Song to twist free. She stumbled away. "Kill her! Kill her!"

Meilin leaped off the rock a second before the water dragon slammed down. The stone disintegrated, and Meilin was lost to the churning sea.

Wave after wave pummelled Meilin. She couldn't break out of the water! Her lungs burned as she tried to hold on to her breath, but it was getting harder. She didn't have any strength left. The surface, the air, was just beyond her fingertips, but her legs wouldn't push her up the few feet she needed.

The wake generated by the water dragon twisted her over and over, sending her crashing against one rock and then another; the ragged corners tore at her skin.

Her arms hung limply in the water. She couldn't do any more.

Meilin raised her head, feebly, toward the surface. Lightning flashed across the sky and a huge shadow passed overhead. She tried, one last time, to reach up, but her limbs felt as heavy as lead.

Her friends needed her....

Powerful fingers grabbed hold of her collar and locked tightly around the material. Then she was hauled out of the water with a roar.

Meilin gasped, filled her chest with the salty air, as Rollan flew her gently to the cliff ledge where Abeke was waiting.

Meilin rolled over, coughing out water.

Rollan held her hand as she did. "Interesting technique. Were you hoping to drink the entire sea?"

Despite herself, Meilin laughed. "Thank you."

"Of course," Rollan said, his voice gentle. "Don't scare me like that." Meilin realized his hand was shaking. She squeezed it, and he squeezed back.

"It's not over yet," Abeke said. She and Rollan lifted Meilin back to her feet.

Conor and Briggan continued fighting the water dragon, with Song now riding upon his back.

The two didn't have a chance.

Seaspray lashed out with his tail and knocked Briggan across the water. The wolf spun over the surface like a skipping stone before Conor called him into passive.

Conor tried to climb up after Song, but the dragon buckled, flipping him off. He splashed down, disappearing for a few heart-freezing moments, before breaking the surface. Using his shepherd's crook as a float, he paddled toward cover.

"Watch yourself," said Abeke as she pulled Meilin against the cliff wall.

Rocks fell past them.

"This whole cliff's coming down," said Rollan. "And the palace with it. It's right above us."

The cliff shook again, and the sound of it drowned out the thunder.

But not the lightning. Song appeared just off the cliff, outlined in the brilliant flashes. Song glared from her high seat on the dragon's shoulders.

She's beyond help, Meilin realized bleakly. *All she has now is blind anger.*

All she has ...

"Song!" Meilin cried. "Come get me, you coward!"

"Meilin ..." warned Rollan. "We've got to go. Now."

Meilin ignored the pebbles falling all around her. The cliff was coming down.

She cupped her hands and shouted. "Your father may have been cruel, but you've become everything you hated about him! You seized the throne by treachery! All you have is through lies and betrayal! What kind of empress will you be?"

Abeke grabbed her wrist and glared at her. "Meilin! We need to get off this ledge!"

The cliff began tilting. The palace above cracked, a large chunk of wall missing them by mere inches.

Song screamed with pure, incoherent fury. The water dragon lurched toward them, determined to finish off Meilin once and for all.

That's it ...

"Meilin!" yelled Rollan. "Take my hand!"

The thunder was deafening, but it wasn't from the storm. The rocks above them roared angrily.

Massive chunks of marble, granite, and earth came tumbling down. Abeke and Rollan were right beside her, yelling, but Meilin couldn't hear them over the noise. This was how the world ended.

The water dragon plowed through the waves. Song glared at Meilin, her hatred consuming her.

"Come on ..." muttered Meilin.

Seaspray opened his immense jaws and gave out a deep, dreadful roar.

He rose up. Ten feet, then twenty.

"We're going!" Rollan locked his arms around Meilin's waist. Abeke prepared to leap.

The water dragon towered over them. Song's face was lit by lightning. The wind whipped all around her. She was wild, the Dragon's Eye burning in her hands with a malevolent light.

Then she glanced up, and Song's expression twisted from one of rage to terror.

The cliff collapsed.

Abeke leaped from the cliff. Rollan pulled Meilin close and flew.

Song gave a single cry, but it was immediately drowned out by the cataclysmic sound of the entire cliff coming down. The palace tumbled in an avalanche of marble and dirt.

Abeke bounced from one boulder to another, then up onto a ledge wide enough to support her. "Come on!" she ordered as she raced up the broken remains of the path.

Rollan held tightly to Meilin as he followed, the wind whipping his cloak behind them. Meilin looked back, catching glimpses of the destruction behind the billowing cloth.

The water dragon thrashed in blind fury as countless tons of cliff fell down upon him. There was no sign of Song.

No matter how mighty the dragon was, Seaspray couldn't withstand the onslaught of rock. The dragon vanished as a huge cloud of dust exploded onto the surface of the water.

Meilin's ears still rang with the sounds of tearing rock for a long time after.

She, Rollan, and Abeke sat on the edge of the cliff, or what remained of it, overlooking the beach. Jhi found them there, and immediately began licking the three, closing the worst of their wounds.

The sea calmed and the storm receded, until all that fell was quiet rain.

Wet, bedraggled, and bruised, Conor came stumbling up the cliff path to collapse down beside them, too exhausted

to speak. He released Briggan. The wolf went to the edge of the cliff and howled. Uraza sat down beside Abeke and nuzzled against her.

Essix circled above, her great wings unfurled as she rode the sea wind.

The sun broke through the clouds. A strip of blue sky appeared. Meilin leaned back into the grass, letting the sunlight warm her.

It was over.



ESSIX SOARED OVER THE BEACH. THE SUN SHONE brightly in a cloudless sky with a whispering wind. The sea itself was a calm mirror, the waves gently lapping upon the pebbles and ruins.

A grand ship waited a mile out, its wide sails displaying the colors of the Niloan High Chieftain. All other boats and ships were now just driftwood.

Rollan sat on what had been the outer gatehouse of the palace. He followed the flight of the falcon and was more than tempted to take off after her. But the seagulls seemed upset enough with Essix in the sky. No telling how they'd react to *him* flying among them.

Instead, he patted his cloak, neatly folded beside him. *Did you see me, Tarik? he thought. I flew! Just like Essix. Your cloak became my wings. You saved me again.*

Soldiers explored the beach, still searching for the remains of Song and Seaspray. They found nothing. Wherever the empress and her spirit animal were, the sea had them now.

But others had been recovered. Not far away were three bodies, covered in green cloaks. A guard sat beside them

and someone had already placed flowers upon each.

Rollan's heart was heavy. Kofe, Lady Cranston, and Salaman had all perished trying to save him, a boy they hardly knew.

They were Greencloaks.

He rested his palm on Tarik's cloak. It was a coarse piece of cloth, old and threadbare in places; it had been torn and repaired a dozen times. To look at it, one might think it was little more than rag, but to him it was priceless.

Even more so now.

The life of a Greencloak was not one of peace and comfort. They spent their days on the road, and their nights under the stars. They made mistakes. Occasionally big ones.

But they were always there when it mattered most, trying to help. Sometimes they failed, but they never gave up.

"Come down from there, Rollan." Meilin beckoned him from below. "The engineers haven't declared the building safe."

"I'm fine here," he said. "Why don't you come up?"

She folded her arms defiantly. "We can't all fly, in case you've forgotten."

Sighing, Rollan tucked his cloak under his arm and climbed down. "Satisfied?"

"There's breakfast cooking at the camp."

Rollan's belly rumbled. "Now you're talking."

The "camp" was a chaotic cluster of tents—large and small, elegant and tatty. Jhi sat happily in the grass with a fistful of bamboo. Some of the smaller children of the palace staff watched her in rapt awe. Jhi generally ignored them, but any sudden movement had them shrieking.

Abeke and Uraza were on the beach. The big leopard was sniffing around the ruins, the same way Briggan and a few of the hunting dogs were searching what was left of the

palace. Not everyone had been accounted for, including Brunhild the Merry and Wikam the Just.

But most of the Oathbound were. Cordelia's body was under a sheet, and Kana and Sid sat in chains at the edge of camp.

Rollan saw them in the distance. The Zhongese nobles weren't leaving anything to chance. Three of the biggest warriors the palace could spare were acting as babysitters.

Kana caught his eye. She gave him a weak smile and a little shrug—*What can you do?*—then glanced down to Toey curled in her lap.

But the longer Rollan watched her, the more he saw the pain beneath. Kana was good at hiding, but Rollan had always been good at seeing people.

The Oathbound captain had lost everything, including her best friend.

"What's going to happen to her?" he asked.

Meilin glanced to the prisoners. "I don't know," she said. "They'll be in prison for a long time. And the Oathbound will be disbanded, of course." She sighed. "I'll speak on her behalf. In the end, Kana surrendered. She was trying to help her friend. That should count for something."

Rollan shook his head. It hadn't been so long ago his only concern had been where to get his next meal. Now the fate of kingdoms rested on his shoulders. He paused and sniffed. "Something smells good."

"What is it?"

He tapped his nose. "Let's just follow and find out, shall we?"

They came to a small campfire with a large cauldron bubbling over it.

A soldier handed them each a bowl of vegetables and noodles. A few herbs floated in the green liquid; it smelled delicious. Rollan's stomach growled with approval, and

impatience. He took a spoon and scooped a mouthful. The soup burned, but it was good. He savored every morsel.

A shadow fell over Meilin and Rollan as they ate.

Rollan squinted. "Chief Ugo?"

He smiled. "The same." He sat down beside them. "What an extraordinary night."

"I'm glad your ship survived."

The big man nodded as he accepted his own bowl. "It's a good thing we were anchored offshore. Still, it was a rough night for Worthy and the other prisoners."

"How is Worthy?"

"Convinced he'll never be a sailor."

The chief turned to face them. "What you and your companions did is incredible."

Meilin spoke. "How's Greenhaven?"

"Safe. Whatever cataclysm Song was summoning, it died with her. Port cities from here to Greenhaven will have suffered flooding, but the great wave never made it. With Song dead and two bond tokens back in safe hands, the truth of what happened is being carried to the Citadel. The Greencloaks are exonerated." He finished off the bowl and stood up. "Now my business here is ended, and I'm looking forward to getting sand between my toes. Next time you're in Nilo, come visit."

Rollan winked at Meilin. "Always good to have friends in high places."

"I've *always* had friends in high places," replied Meilin, smiling.

Rollan laughed. "I was born in the gutter. Let me savor the moment."

Meilin looked over to a crowd at a nearby tent. "Speaking of high places, we need a word with Ambassador Ying."

"Ah, leave him to it, Meilin. Today's too nice a day to talk politics."

The center of camp was a table salvaged from the kitchens. Ambassador Ying, still dressed in his prison rags, had spent all morning writing letters and instructions. His crane watched, perched up on the top of the adjacent tent. The nobles of Zhong and representatives from the other kingdoms were being summoned to discuss the recent government opening, and how to find a way forward without their empress.

No sooner would he finish one letter than another blank sheet of parchment was put in front of Ying. His fingers were black with ink stains. Riders queued up, their horses saddled and ready.

Rollan refilled his bowl from the simmering cauldron. "There's going to be a lot of rebuilding."

"The Summer Palace is beyond saving," Meilin said. "But there are other—"

Rollan shook his head. "I mean trust. Song assassinated her father. She blamed the Greencloaks. The other rulers will be wary, not just of Zhong, but of each other. And of themselves. Who knows if they have another Song within their own families?"

Meilin looked at him, curiously.

"What?" Rollan wiped his chin. "Have I got something on my face?"

"Right there." Meilin tapped his forehead. "It looks like wisdom."

He blushed. "Hey, I keep telling you all how great I am. You just never listen."

"I know you're great," Meilin said, and Rollan felt his cheeks blush even further. *Stupid cheeks.*

Meilin sighed, glancing back to the sea. "Song framed the Greencloaks. She killed countless people, including her own father. But I can't help but wonder what would have happened if someone had seen how trapped and desperate she was. If someone had done something to help her."

“You feel bad for her?”

“It doesn’t make any difference.”

A servant approached, falling into a low bow. “The ambassador wishes to speak with you.”

“About what?”

The servant frowned. “I think he has a request of you.”

Rollan groaned. “Can’t he get someone else? In case you hadn’t noticed, we did nearly have a palace fall on our heads last night.”

Meilin laughed and nudged him. “Let’s find out what he wants, at least.”

Rollan swallowed the last of the soup down, then headed off to the heart of the camp. Abeke and Conor joined them, their spirit animals at their heels.

“Any luck?” Rollan asked.

Abeke shook her head. “Song’s gone. They’ve sent a few boats out, but I doubt they’d find anything now. The storm would have carried her too far out.”

Pain flickered across Meilin’s face. That was a terrible death, but Song had brought it upon herself.

Rollan put his hand on her arm. “You tried to help her, Meilin. You really did.”

Ambassador Ying stood up as they arrived. He stretched out to his full height, which wasn’t much. “All this hunching over letters isn’t doing me any good.”

“You need us for something?” asked Rollan.

Ying arched one white eyebrow. “There will always be work for Greencloaks. There’s no escaping it, boy.”

Rollan rolled his eyes.

Ying laughed, and Rollan thought he could still hear a bit of the crazy old man in him. “The Dragon’s Eye and the Wildcat’s Claw are gone. That’s half of our order’s precious *gifts*. But the best gift is peace, don’t you think? Peace ... and the truth. Which will be hard for some to bear.”

“The truth about Song?” asked Meilin.

"I pity the poor girl," the old man said with a sigh. "She was kind, once, Meilin. You could see that, couldn't you?"

Meilin nodded.

"But that kindness will be forever lost. Her name will become a cursed one, as will the memory of her. She was misguided, twisted by ambition and anger. I think perhaps I share some of the blame for that. I didn't do enough to protect her. To help foster her bond. But we cannot hide her crimes, for then innocents suffer." He handed her a scroll. "Take this to Greenhaven."

Meilin took it, but held it gently. "What's it say?"

"Everything. The Greencloaks were framed, and I have the signatures of a whole palace full of witnesses to prove it. That should quash any hint of our order's misdeeds. Present that letter to Olvan. We'll need to convene another conference at the Citadel." He looked darkly at the two chained captives. "There will be a trial. All will be made public soon."

Rollan looked at the tube of paper. They were going back to Greenhaven. Relief flooded through him.

A soldier approached. He saluted and then whispered to Ying. The old man smiled. "That's *wonderful* news!" he cried.

"What is it?" asked Conor.

"My breakfast is ready."

Rollan chuckled, then smacked his lips. "The noodle soup's pretty good."

Ying smiled. "I know. It's my mother's own recipe."



"I hope we get a bigger cabin than last time," said Rollan as he gazed out at the ship.

"I just hope we get rooms of our own." Conor sat on the beach while Briggan sniffed around the pebbles. His crook

lay on the sand beside him. "No offense, but you snore."

"I do not snore."

Abeke laughed. "It's like the trumpeting of a herd of elephants, Rollan."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Abeke shrugged. "I kind of liked it. Reminds me of home."

Rollan looked over to Meilin. "Is it that bad?"

"Hey, I'm not part of this discussion." She rubbed her panda's belly. "I just want to make sure Jhi's had enough bamboo for the trip."

Essix circled overhead. With one swoop she scared off a flock of seagulls, then she beat her wings and settled down at the edge of their circle. There was a fish in her beak.

"Fattening up yourself, eh?" Rollan asked.

The falcon set to the busy task of tearing and eating.

The ship was anchored a few hundred yards out. It was evening, but the captain had declared he wanted to set sail at low tide. Ying had been equally keen to get his letter to Greenhaven sooner rather than later.

A rowboat approached, a lantern hanging at the front. The boat bobbed over the breaking waves and the oarsmen jumped out to drag it up.

"That's our cue," said Conor. He gave Briggan's furry cheeks a good shake. The wolf slobbered over his face. "Yuck."

Then Briggan vanished, and the mark appeared on his arm. Conor gazed at it for a moment, then rolled down his sleeve. He collected his crook, moving it from hand to hand, before settling it in his left. He picked up his rucksack.

Meilin kissed Jhi, and a moment later the panda vanished to reappear as a tattoo on her own forearm. She pulled out her hairpin and retwisted her hair into a long braid before pushing the pin back. She slung a bag over her shoulder and joined Conor.

Uraza licked Abeke's open palm and then, in a swirl of spots, formed an image on Abeke's skin. The girl collected her bow and quiver. "Come on, Rollan."

Rollan gazed over at Essix. "Well?"

The falcon beat her wings and was airborne. She rose almost vertically, soaring over the beach and toward the ship.

"Fine." Essix could fly alongside.

Rollan patted his folded cloak, his bond token. He felt a gentle tremor through the material, as if it were anticipating the wind passing through its folds once more.

Essix shrieked from above, for all the joy of being free.

Rollan knew exactly how the falcon felt.

He gathered his rucksack and headed down the beach to his friends.



To all the fans who've followed Conor, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan on their adventures—who uncovered the lost histories of the Great Beasts and collected talismans in the online game as the Keeper—thank you. This series has been very dear to us, and we hope it's meant something to you, too.

The journey wasn't always easy. Sometimes sad and scary things happened, just like in real life. But at the heart of this story is the belief that people from different places and cultures can come together for the good of all.

Even if we can't magically summon spirit animals to grant us superhuman powers, we can all be more than ourselves. It just takes courage and kindness.

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1

Javi

Next question,” Molly said. “How many miles of wire are in this airplane?”

“Um, a lot?”

“Put your brain to work, Perez. Estimate!”

Javier Perez sighed. “If I get close, will you stop bugging me with these questions?”

“Nope. You need the distraction.” Molly clutched her book of airplane trivia and grinned. “I’ve got at least fourteen hours’ worth. Enough for the whole flight!”

“You wanted to sit by her!” Anna said from the row behind, and Oliver laughed beside her.

Javi groaned, wishing the plane would take off so he could lean back and pretend to sleep.

Telling Molly that he was afraid of flying had been a terrible idea. Because that made it her job, as team leader, to distract him—with engineering problems, of course. At

Robotics Club every afternoon, Molly always talked while she worked, explaining what she was doing, challenging others to do the same. For her, making robots wasn't just a hobby, it was a *conversation*.

The funny thing was, the distraction was actually working. Once Javi's brain had latched onto her question, the plane became more than a huge unknown carrying him away from home for the first time ever. Now it was an engineering problem.

How many miles of wire? Javi thought.

The four members of Team Killbot, along with their adviser, Mr. Keating, were sitting in economy. Brooklyn Science and Tech had lots of rich people who donated money to the school, and when the team had qualified for the Robot Soccer World Championships, some millionaire had stepped up to pay travel costs.

But first class to Japan for five people? Nobody had *that* much money to give away.

Even so, this was what Mr. Keating called "fancy economy," designed for fourteen-hour flights. Javi's seat was surrounded by buttons and lights and a video screen. All of which were connected to wires, right?

He'd already tested the buttons on his armrest. They controlled the angle of his seat, a reading light, the screen. There was a button for summoning a flight attendant, and a rocker switch with volume symbols. There was even a little remote control for games (which also seemed to be a phone, in case you needed to call someone from halfway across the Arctic Circle).

Javi found himself wanting to strip it all down, to see those wires, motors, and gears out in the open. He'd been taking things apart as long as he could remember, starting when his mother had let him take apart her busted microwave when he was five years old.

He imagined the wires under the cabin floor, snaking up and around the curves of the chair. And another bright web above him, bringing power to all those lights and air blowers in the ceiling—

“Conjectures?” Molly prompted. “Conclusions?”

Javi’s brain buzzed. Each seat would need at least a hundred feet of wire, and there were about five hundred people on the plane. That was *ten miles* right there, on top of the ailerons and engines, the cockpit crammed with gauges, the extra wires needed for the huge business class seats a few rows ahead.

Too much to calculate, so he multiplied his first guess by ten.

“In the whole plane, maybe a hundred miles of wire?”

“Not too bad.” Molly waved her book. “But it’s more like *three* hundred. A technical tour de force!”

“Okay, wow,” Javi said, though amazement was the surest route to more trivia questions. “It seems like a waste, using a machine this complicated to fly our dinky little robots to Tokyo.”

“The Killbots are *not* dinky,” Molly said. “They’re the reigning US champions of robot soccer, junior division!”

Javi shrugged. “May I remind you that the other team’s robots got broken in shipping? We lucked into this.”

“We would’ve won anyway.” Molly’s expression dared him to argue.

Javi wasn’t sure. He’d seen videos of the robots built by the unlucky finalists from New Mexico—scuttling four-legged scorpions that whacked the soccer ball with their tails. In stark contrast, the Brooklyn Killbots were toasters on wheels. Mindless bullies that swarmed the ball, knocking other players out their way.

“Like how five-year-olds play soccer,” one of the judges had muttered in the semifinals.

And there were, what, maybe twenty feet of wire in each Killbot?

Not exactly a technical tour de force.

Last night, Javi's whole family had gathered for a send-off dinner: uncles, aunts, and cousins all telling him how proud they were. His mother had told stories of him helping on her superintendent rounds when he was little, fixing locks and faucets at age seven. But for the whole dinner he'd felt like a fraud.

What kind of engineer was afraid to get on an airplane?

"Next question," Molly said. "How many Aero Horizon flights have ever crashed?"

He stared at her. Was she just trolling him now?

If building robots had taught Javi anything, it was that way too much could go wrong with machines. No matter how carefully he tested them, the Killbots were always doing unpredictable stuff in the middle of a match.

He thought about those three hundred miles of wire in the airplane, the millions of rivets and seals and screws, the engines and tanks full of flammable fuel. All those parts that could break, warp, fail, or explode.

"I'm going to go with ... two?" he said hopefully.

"Nope," Molly said. "Zero!"

"Really?"

"Yep. No crashes in the whole fleet, in forty years."

"Huh." Javi felt a relieved smile reach his lips, and his irritation with Molly faded. Even when she was trolling him, she always had a plan. "Thanks."

She shrugged, as if to say that his fears were forgotten. "Just enjoy the flight, Perez. We're going to win for real this time."

Javi gave her a fist to bump. "Team Killbot!"

Mr. Keating leaned forward from the row behind. "Um, guys. Maybe no more discussion of airplane crashes?"

"Actually," Molly said, "we were discussing the total absence of airplane crashes."

"Still," Mr. Keating said firmly. "Some people are nervous about flying."

"Not us engineers." Molly smiled at Javi. "Next question..."

"Last question," Javi pleaded.

Molly looked like she was about to argue, but then a *ping* went through the cabin, and a voice announced that the doors were closing.

Javi swallowed. Last night, he had imagined himself jumping up and running off the plane when this moment came. But thanks to Molly's distractions, he was managing to sit here quietly.

"Fire away," he said.

"This is my favorite one." Molly clutched the trivia book close, guarding the answer. "What do flight attendants call it when the oxygen masks drop down?"

Javi frowned. "There's a name for that?"

"It's secret flight attendant slang. Let me give you a hint: The oxygen sensor gets tripped, right? And suddenly all those rubber masks fall out of the ceiling. Everyone's freaking out, screaming like *animals*. So what do flight attendants call it?"

"Um, a really bad day at work?"

"Nope." Molly gave him a pleased smile. "They call it a 'rubber jungle.' Get it? Because everyone goes primal, and there's all those masks hanging down like vines! And usually it's just an accident, because of a broken sensor."

Javi tried to smile back at her, but now he was thinking about those hundreds of masks up in the ceiling, each tightly wound in its little compartment, like snakes ready to spring out and start a panic.

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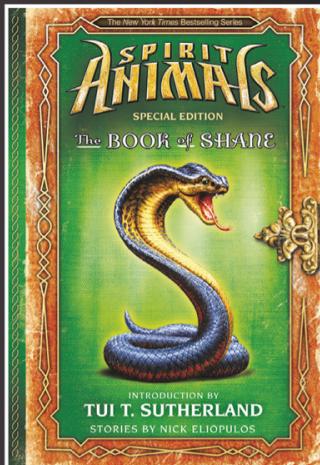
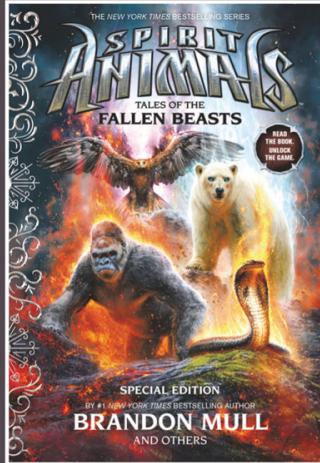
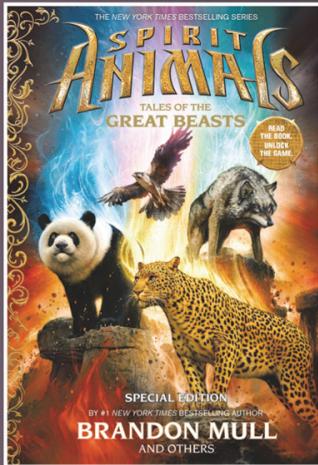
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